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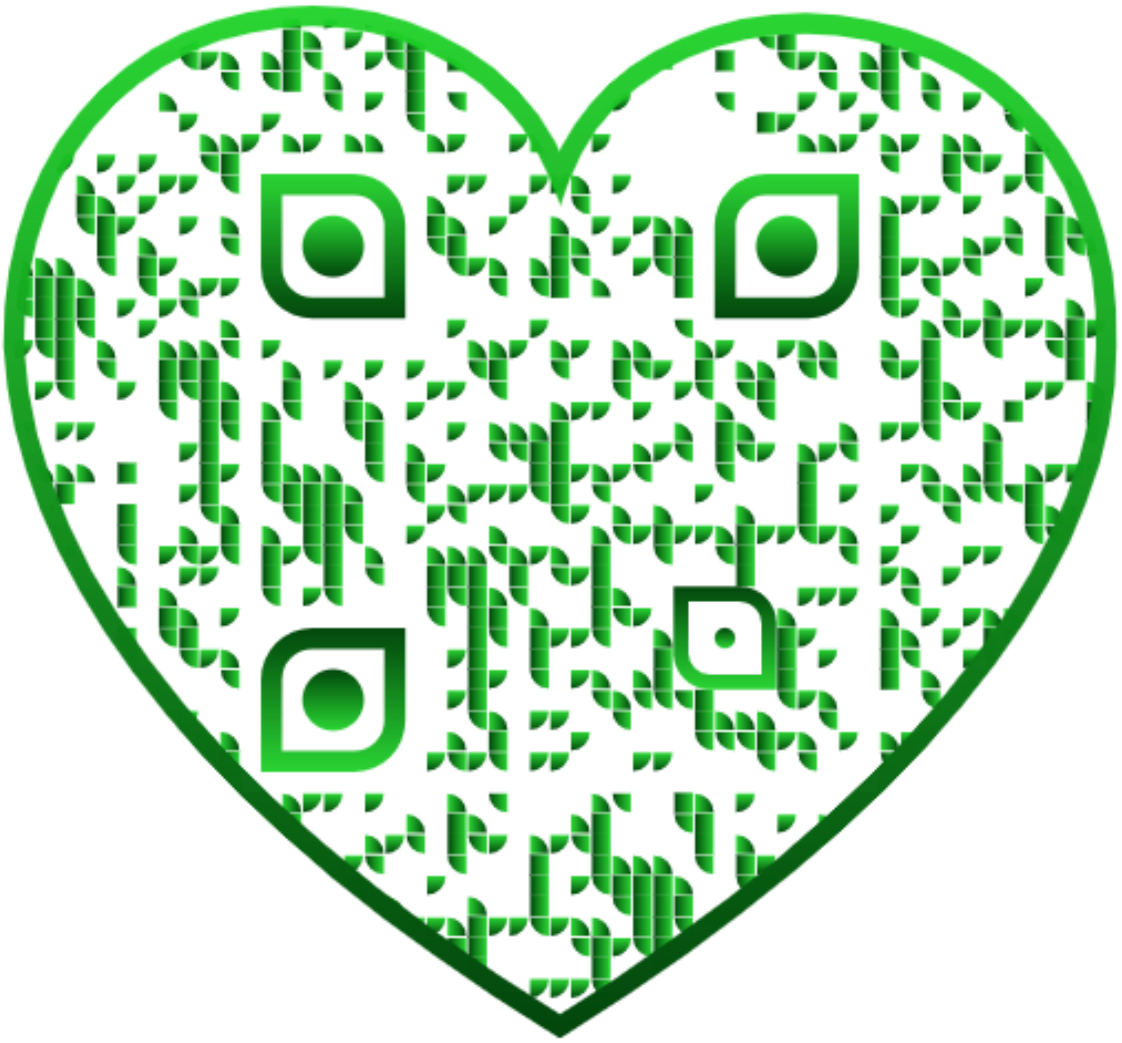
LØREN
is Not Alone

The South Korean prodigy found comfort in alt-rock's universal depths; now he's sharing space with his heroes



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Correspondence

+ LOVE LETTERS & ADVICE

"The pair of them have taken the digital world by storm."

— Abhilasha Khurrana

Digital Domination

Seeing Niharika NM and Srushti Tawade back on the cover is great. The pair of them have taken the digital world by storm and are excelling like the true champions they are. Looking forward to all that they have in store for the rest of the year.

SPOTLIGHT

Indian Ocean Make a Comeback

It is so fantastic to see one of my favorite bands and one of the all-time great groups from the country, Indian Ocean release new music. Their latest song "Jaadu Maaya" is a beautiful composition, and I can't wait to hear it live as well as listen to the full album when it comes out.

- Atish Pereira

Shreya Jain's Success

Learning about singer-songwriter Shreya Jain's story is quite captivating. Her rise as an artist is amazing and the hard work she's put in along the way is really paying off. Glad to see her growth and can't wait to catch her live at her next gig.

- Mukul Anthal

Music to Movie

How wonderful it is to see an indie artist be cast in a major role in a movie. Utsavi Jha's recent work behind the screen for the film 'Gulmohar' is quite an achievement.

- Abhishek Lodaya

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Opening Act

Sam Smith: ‘Modesty, Decadence, and Joy’

IN THE MOMENTS just before Sam Smith emerges to sing “Gloria” on tour, you can find them beneath the stage, getting perfectly glam. “The show is seamless, but the flurry backstage during costume changes is crazy,” says Smith, 31. “It reminds me of the theater productions I worked on when I was younger.” This shot captures some of the prep that goes into the show’s thrilling final act. “I’m dressed in a bridal veil, crown, and fishnets,” Smith adds. “Modesty, decadence, and joy all singing together. This picture almost captures that wedding-night excitement — when my team work together like this, it’s a triumph.”

SIMON VOZICK-LEVINSON

Smith and crew backstage in Bologna, Italy, on May 20

The Mix

WHAT'S NEW, WHAT'S NEXT, WHAT'S NUTS

Reneé Rapp Is Ready for Her Close-Up

The 'Sex Lives of College Girls' star is finally making the music she's always dreamed of

PHOTOGRAPHS BY Thalia Gochez

➔ RENEÉ RAPP

Reneé rapp hasn't been sleeping well. The past six months have been a bit of a sleep-deprived haze for the singer and actress, full of weird or straight-up horrific dreams. Most of the time, she's being booed off a stage. Once, she dreamed about murdering a person she had just started dating. The night before we talk, she had one so bad she doesn't want to repeat it. "It was a really not-great thing to dream about," she says.

Her subconscious isn't the only thing that's been keeping her up in recent months. Last year, with her career already gaining speed thanks to her starring role in Mindy Kaling's hit Max comedy, *The Sex Lives of College Girls,* Rapp released her first EP as a musician, *Everything to Everyone,* and set out on a headlining tour in December. That winter, she started working on her full-length debut, due out this summer on Interscope. In January, she traveled to Europe for more shows. In March, she settled into New Jersey to film *Mean Girls: The Musical* — the movie adaptation of the Broadway show based on the 2004 film, in which she will star as Regina George. And when we speak in mid-May, she's busy looking for a new home.

"I feel like it's September in my brain but it's May in practice," she says. She packed a lot into the two months she had in New Jersey; her album team, including producer and friend Alexander 23 as a key member, began spending time on the East Coast to help her finish the LP on weekends and late nights after filming.

"When someone is like, 'Are you down to work every weekend?' I'm like, 'Yeah, of course. You fucking kidding me?'" Rapp, 23, says. "Then I do a week of filming and I'm like a fucking zombie."

That kind of pace is nothing new for her. After independently dropping the song "Tattoos" last spring, Rapp quickly caught the attention of major labels. Interscope ended up signing her just two days before she had to begin filming the second season of *College Girls*; she went to write and record her first EP after spending 14-hour days on set. "Everything happens at fucking once," she says now. "I overextended myself. But I'm glad I did. I'm not big into regrets."

Growing up in Charlotte, North Carolina, Rapp knew early on that she wanted to go into show business. She was an outgoing kid — "the fearless version of who I am now," she says — but a sensitive one, too, with big, easily hurt feelings.

After several years of dance lessons starting at age three, a friend's mom encouraged Rapp's mother to have her audition for a local production of *Annie.* Theater became something she mostly did during the summers. She remembers feeling isolated from the rest of the local theater community, and says that the same person who suggested she try out for *Annie* ended up "talking shit" about Rapp around Charlotte's theater community.

"I feel like there's a lot of shit to say about me," Rapp says. "You can say I fucking am blunt, or very emotional, or whatever, yada, yada, yada. But they weren't even saying that. They were just saying bullshit."

Even when she felt ostracized, Rapp says, performing at summer-camp shows or local productions was a thrill. "I loved being onstage," she says. "I also really loved being around all of these people who knew so much about this specific art form but wanted nothing to do with me. I was like, 'Fuck, I want you guys to like me so bad.'"

In her teens, she refocused her attention on getting out of Charlotte. She tried joining a girl group that ended up going nowhere. After hearing about an alum of her high school who had won a Jimmy Award — a national musical-theater honor for teenagers — and gone straight from high school to Broadway, Rapp decided to channel her competitive nature into the same plan. She succeeded, taking home a Jimmy and getting cast at age 19 in the Broadway adaptation of *Mean Girls* by producers Tina Fey and Lorne Michaels.

It was a huge moment, but she still had her sights set on bigger things. "I told them, 'I will only take this job if you promise to help me in my music career one day. I want to be a pop star. I do not want to do this forever,'" Rapp recalls. "They have been such a huge support system."

FAST FACTS

B'DAY
Growing up in Charlotte, Rapp says, she wanted to be Beyoncé from the first time she became aware of who Beyoncé was.

POWER THROUGH IT
Rapp recalls cutting vocals for her LP from the couch when she got tired.

YOU'VE GOT A FRIEND
She's close with *College Girls* castmate Alyah Chanelle Scott. "I am so insanely lucky to have her," Rapp says.

Living in New York, Rapp felt overwhelmed. She made friends with the cast, but still felt disconnected, since they were all older and more settled in their lives. For the several months she played Regina George, she was also struggling with an eating disorder.

"It was because of things that were said and done to me on that show," Rapp says, recalling hurtful comments from "someone who was really influential on that project and in my life at the time." (She notes that it was not anyone who worked on the *Mean Girls* film.) "Getting told how he could tell I didn't like my body ... I was like, 'I'm a fucking teenager,'" she says. She became so sick during this period that she would get pulled out in the middle of shows, feeling nauseous and faint because she wasn't eating enough.

When *Mean Girls* shut down along with the rest of Broadway in March 2020, eventually closing for good, Rapp felt relief.

"There's a picture of me on FaceTime with my ex, sobbing and being like, 'Oh, my God, I'm going to eat in the middle of the day.' I was scared shitless, and I was also happier than I had been in a very long time."

She thought that in the time she wasn't working, she could explore songwriting. The break didn't last long: By that fall, she'd been cast as a lead in *College Girls,* as the preppy, closeted Leighton, and moved to L.A. to start filming.

Now, for the time being, Rapp's attention is finally all focused on her pop ambition. (When we speak, Season Three of *College Girls* is on pause due to the ongoing WGA strike.) She says her album, *Snow Angel,* is a snapshot of what she's been going through lately, including her still processing the "intense" breakup that informed her 2022 EP.

Songs like her new single, the LP's title track, which came together in a late-night punch-up session with Alexander 23, showcase the album's unflinching emotional honesty. "It is the most intense interpersonal relationships and experiences that I've had over the last five months, whether they be good or bad," she says. "And all of them are bad."

In Alexander 23, she adds, she's found a creative partner who balances her emotional self: "He's someone who never cries, and I cry all the time." A once hater of pop music, who started leaning more into the natural poppiness of her sound, Rapp feels like the new songs are a perfect amalgamation of the R&B and classic rock she grew up loving, thanks to her parents.

The other thing she's noticed: The songs are really difficult for her to listen to, "which," as she puts it, "means I know it's good enough to put out." BRITTANY SPANOS

HAIR BY MARISSA MARINO FOR A-FRAME. MAKEUP BY LOREN ASHLEY. STYLING BY MORGAN FINNEGAN. FOR THIS ONLY AGENCY. PREVIOUS PAGE: LOOK BY RHUDE. THIS PAGE: OUTFIT BY DEAD ATLANTIC.

Mali's 'Walk Away' Gets Immersive Studio Treatment

The Mumbai-based singer-songwriter has finally released an official version of the song which has been part of her repertoire for a number of years

PARIZAD D

When Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Maalavika Manoj aka Mali released a live version of her song "Walk Away" on her YouTube channel in 2017 from the erstwhile Cotton Press Studio, her intention was to send the clip to promoters to snag gigs. However, that video has since amassed over 65,000 views on YouTube and Mali says, "I didn't realize it would become a release of its own."

Although "Walk Away" dates back almost a decade ago, Mali doesn't quite remember when she exactly wrote it. She says, "I do remember feeling a new sense of independence after I went solo [as an artist] and my best friend going through a long, arduous breakup at around the same time. I think it came from a place of finding strength and resolve to move on from something." The singer adds, "The first time I performed it was at a family gathering and it instantly became their favorite song of mine, and it still remains one of their favorites."

As Mali began performing the song more often at various gigs as well as on other YouTube channels, "Walk Away" ended up gaining a life of its own without there being an official audio version of the track out for the longest time. That's all changed now with Mali putting out a studio recording recently.

"The first time I performed it ['Walk Away'] was at a family gathering and it instantly became their favorite song of mine, and it still remains one of their favorites."

On why she finally decided to get down to releasing "Walk Away," Mali says, "I wanted to release this song before I started losing a connection with how I felt when I wrote it. At every point, I was more excited about releasing the newer ones because they were fresh and more relatable to what I most recently experienced and 'Walk Away' got left in the bottom of that pile." The musician adds, "I put out a poll asking fans what songs I should be playing for Lollapalooza and I didn't even include 'Walk Away' on that poll, but I had an overwhelming number of people DM me requesting that I not leave it out of the set. I started to see just how popular the song was with my fans, and so this release is for them."

"Walk Away" opens with rustic acoustic guitars before a hypnotic groove, immersive production as well as Mali's airy and mellifluous vocals carry the song. Apart from Mali, the song features guitarist Jishnu 'Short Round' Guha, bassist Stuart DaCosta (from rock outfit The Yellow Diary) and backing vocals from singers Aria Nanji and Mallika Barot. The track has been produced by Mumbai's Island City Studios' drummer-producer Jehangir Jehangir.

The song has also been heavily covered by other musicians through the years. Mali says, "People have made full-on live performance videos and music videos of it before I had the chance to release it on streaming platforms." She adds, "It just goes to show that the connection one forms with a song has little to do with how big a deal you make of the release or promotion of it."

"Walk Away" follows the melancholic "Ashes" which was released at the end of 2022. "The thought that I'm releasing two breakup songs consecutively has crossed my mind, although they were from completely different phases in my life," says Mali. In between these two releases Mali has been focusing on refining her live set with her band. On what's next, she says, "I've got some collaborations in the pipeline." DAVID BRITTO

INSTAGRAM/THECONCERTMEDIA

Meet Sammy, the Nigerian-Origin Hindi Rapper with Big Plans in Indian Hip-Hop

The Delhi NCR-based artist talks about being influenced by music from both countries, finding a community of like-minded musicians and opening for Rema in India

On a road trip with his family, Sammy aka Samuel Lloyds heard Yo Yo Honey Singh's "Brown Rang" and felt overwhelmed. "It was something special for me, to hear rhyming words in Hindi," he says over a call.

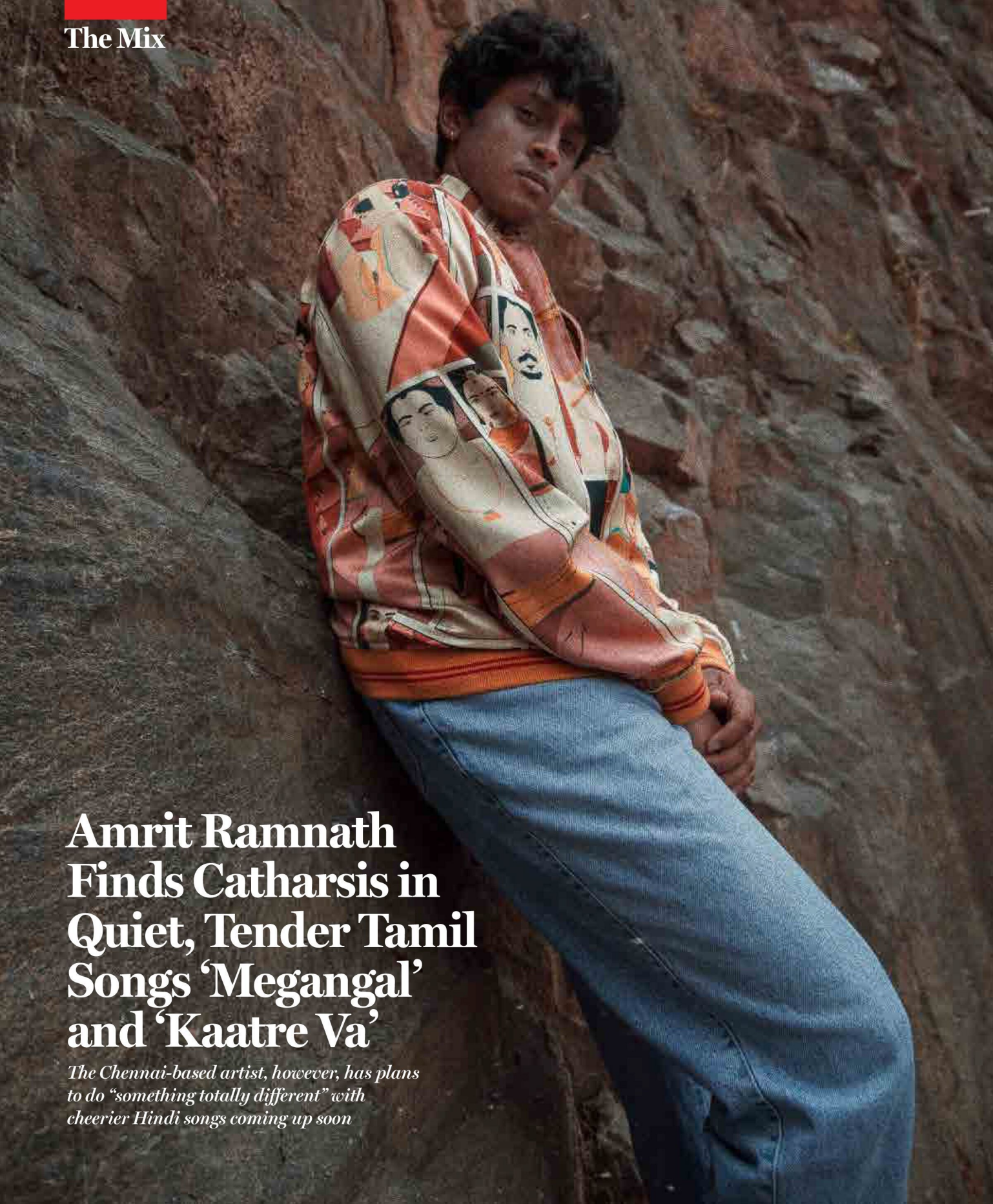
The Nigerian-born, New Delhi-raised rapper says that's when he knew he wanted to make music in Hindi. The son of a priest who was posted to India, there's an unmistakable sense that Noida-based Sammy is integrated not just into Indian hip-hop, but specifically Delhi culture. He uses interjections like "*theek hai*" and explains things with a well-drawn-out cadence that gives the impression that Hindi might even be his first language. Of course, the real convincing happens in his tracks released so far, "Moved On," "Hennessy," "Shaant," and "Dubai" where Sammy collaborates with artists like BBB and MC Static and throws in his shoutout, "Sammy on the track!"

He may not be the most verbose Hindi rapper, but Sammy certainly sounds natural, bringing a baritone-like heaviness to his flow. Writing and releasing music for the last six years, he's aware of his USP – that he can surprise and shock people by rapping in Hindi. "I believe my accent in Hindi is exactly the same as someone who was born in India. I feel that's unique and it will take me places," he adds. He credits finding supportive rappers like BBB, Urban Poet, Flyboy and Whyyou and learning a lot from them.

Sammy counts drill as his strength but doesn't shy away from commercial tunes that mingle Afrobeats and Hindi lyrics. "It has a great scope in India," the rapper says. So far, he's taken to a few stages including The Grub Fest and on the same lineup as Nigerian star Rema on the latter's India shows in Delhi NCR. "Rema has been taking African culture and musical touch, along with Burna Boy and so many more, to the world. I feel Burna Boy will come to India soon," Sammy adds. He name-checks Nigerian artists like Davido, Nasty C, Runtown and more in the same breath as DIVINE, Seedhe Maut, RAGA and Urban Poet, saying there's lots to learn from both sides.

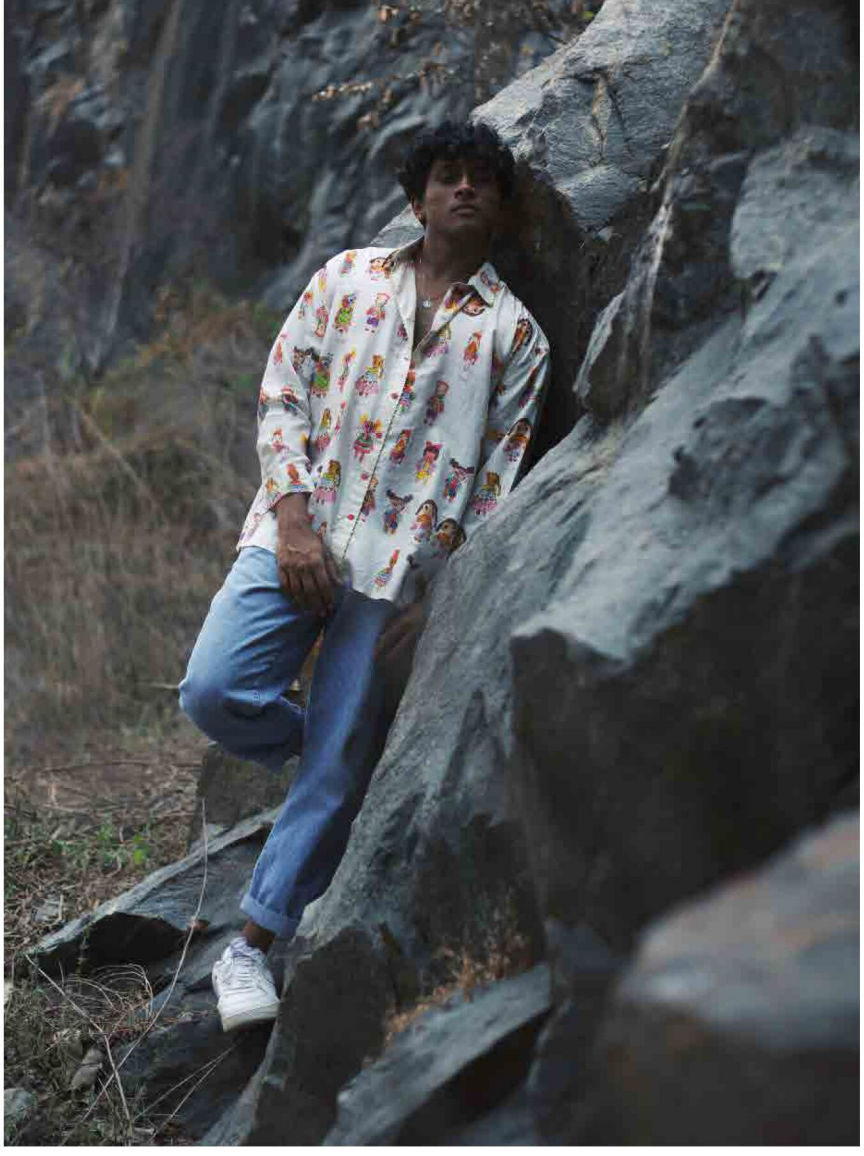
His next single is "4×4" with Urban Poet, and Sammy says there are more collaborations coming up as well within his circle of rapper friends in Noida. There have been a few brand projects as well, including a jingle for an automobile company, but Sammy says he's learning hard truths about the music industry in India, especially within hip-hop. "To be very honest, even after this USP [of being a Nigerian Hindi rapper], there'll be people you have to prove yourself to because I've seen a lot of opportunities which I feel I deserve, just slip because you have to know a lot of people to get it," he says. He recalls how pitching to labels felt very unwelcoming. "I feel there are people who don't care about talent, only about numbers," the rapper adds.

The audiences, though, are more than welcoming at gigs, according to Sammy, as he represents something wholly new in Indian hip-hop. Closer home, though, he says his parents weren't the most supportive in the beginning. "My father is a priest, you know, so he doesn't really believe in all this. When you say you're a rapper, a lot of assumptions fill people's heads," he says. In a true testament to turning his parents into allies in his vision to be a full-time musician, it was when Sammy began getting paid for his rap shows and brand deals that they were convinced. "People started speaking to my parents and telling them I was good at this. Compared to a year back, the support level has really changed now. They're really supporting me now. They ask me now, 'When's your next show?'" Sammy says with a laugh. **ANURAG TAGAT**



Amrit Ramnath Finds Catharsis in Quiet, Tender Tamil Songs 'Megangal' and 'Kaatre Va'

The Chennai-based artist, however, has plans to do "something totally different" with cheerier Hindi songs coming up soon



PRANEETH REDDY

"Dummy I worked with telcos, I worked with multi-national companies. So I know how to treat myself as a brand."

On his latest Tamil song "Kaatre Va," singer-composer Amrit Ramnath takes the indulgent route, crafting a six-and-a-half-minute song with Kochi-based violin and cello artist Rithu Vysakh. It adapts a poem by Tamil poet Mahakavi Bharathi (also known as Bharathiyar) and Amrit turned to one of his most trusted collaborators, vocalist Bombay Jayashri (also his mother) for help in structuring it.

The stirring tune takes a cathartic journey, powered by guitar, string sections and Ramnath's distinctly affectionate and versatile vocals. "This is one indulgent song where creatively, I'm just like, 'I'm just gonna do everything I want to do and release it.' This is that song," he says over a call where he's sharing his upcoming and unreleased music.

Like most of us, Amrit is drawn to strings and knows it's "easy to feel very intensely" with the instrument group. "I can hear strings in everything. I'm a huge fan of [composer] Ennio Morricone. I've recently rediscovered a lot of this stuff and I think just compositionally I like to I feel like strings are a cop out to emotion," he adds. The message on "Kaatre Va" is one of healing and moving on in life, but from a perspective of romance in a different era.

The song follows his previous Tamil release "Megangal," which also lay in a similar somber space. Releasing music since 2019, Amrit has offered variety in his tunes so far, singing in Hindi and Tamil and often having acoustic guitar as a fixture. It calls out to the singer-songwriter in him, but raised in different cities by parents who are heavily inclined to music means that there's always a lot more to tap into. The artist says music is a "second language of sorts" and learning to play violin, guitar, and harmonium, as well as become a classically trained vocalist is all formative to the kind of music he makes.

He released his EP *Jago* with fellow singer-composer Amira Gill in 2022 and has since put out only Tamil songs. That's about to change, though, as he previews an upcoming Hindi song called "Jeene Do." True to his love for acoustic melodies, the song has a breezy, Jack Johnson-esque influence that could make it fit into any spirited film soundtrack. He adds about the track, "It's very transparent and I really want to enter the Hindi music scene." It's among about nine Hindi songs that Amrit has in the bank, with "Jeene Do" already being road-tested at a gig in Bengaluru earlier this year. "It was interesting to see how people were reacting. It was the only Hindi song among five songs we played," he adds.

That's not to say it's a complete pivot. Tamil songs like "Oorkuruvi" and "Nila" are in the works, showcasing two different ends of the songwriting spectrum for Amrit. "Oorkuruvi" – which translates to "village bird" – is a Tamil folk-influenced song about gossip culture that fits right into the heartland with plenty of playful percussion flourishes and vocals that seemingly draws from gospel choir. "It's this fictional story that I came up with about this bird that goes from house to house in the village and gossips with the families," he adds. The somber "Nila," on the other hand, is among his most recent compositions, written and recorded while he was taking care of his mother as she recovered from an aneurysm in the U.K. earlier this year.

The family's just returned home a week ago after extensive treatment that has the renowned Carnatic vocalist in recovery mode. Amrit says, "What she had was fairly critical. So when she was there, things were all over the place. It was very overwhelming for me and my family. But then once she got out of the ICU, and when things eased out, she started writing a lot of poetry [...] Writing was something she was really keen on doing. She wrote this one particular poem [where] she's metaphorized pain with darkness and how the moon can sort of take away that pain." The artist had a "mini setup" in the room, with his MIDI controller, mic and guitar to record. The backstory makes "Nila" even more heartwarming in the way it sounds triumphant, becoming bright and nocturnal in turns.

Outside of writing on his own and making the most of a mobile setup, Amrit is also working on a song with Rashmeet Kaur, plus another tune with singer-songwriter and percussive guitarist Dhruv Visvanath adding his signature flair. Amrit adds, "I've got about one and a half albums' worth of songs that I'm gonna phase out and release over the next few months and then I just want to get back on stage, because I just love performing." **ANURAG TAGAT**

Simran Choudhary: 'There's Nothing More Commendable Than Women Supporting Other Women'

The singer opens up about her early years, what she's currently working on and future plans

WE RECENTLY CAUGHT UP WITH vocalist Simran Choudhary – who performed at last month's Women in Creativity event at *Rolling Stone India*'s Mumbai headquarters – and discussed her time on the reality singing competition *The Voice*, working alongside Amitabh Bachchan, how it's important to amplify women creators and more. Read excerpts below:

You've said in the past that you never thought of having a backup plan and that music and singing was everything for you. So, what were those early years like for you that shaped you into the artist you are today?
I've been blessed with a family that has always believed in me. My parents have made me the determined woman that I am today. Most parts I remember from my childhood are about my father pushing me to practice more. He always told me, 'Backups are for losers.' I've grown up with the idea of dream, chase, achieve.

You were part of *The Voice India* in 2019 – what was that whole experience like for you?
The Voice was definitely a turning point for me where it opened up so many new dimensions. The immediate exposure you get on reality shows is unbeatable because you get to reach so many people across the globe. That made me connect better with the masses and I realized towards the finale how people were getting so connected with my personality. Performing in front of Sir A.R. Rahman is any artist's dream. To see it turning into reality was surreal.

You've worked alongside some prominent names such as Amitabh Bachchan amongst others, do you ever have "pinch me moments" when you're in the same environment as these people and artists?
I remember the night when 'Guzar Jayega' got released and I checked the streaming platform's title and it said 'Amitabh Bachchan, Simran Choudhary.' Massive tears started rolling down my eyes and the joy was so overwhelming. Could've never imagined such a thing for myself at that early stage of my career.

"I've been trained by my gurus to be that horse in a race that never looks on the sides and only keeps the focus aligned with the path designed."

The music business can sometimes be overwhelming and challenging at times, what's your approach to it and how do you navigate it?
I've been trained by my gurus to be that horse in a race that never looks on the sides and only keeps the focus aligned with the path designed. This is exactly what I try practicing each day. Only giving all I have to my craft and let it decide its own destiny.

This year you've released two new songs in "Pyaar Hi Hona" and "Bikhra Dil" – what can you tell us about these tracks?
These songs have two things in common. One, they are both collaborations with my incredible fellow artists. Two, they are both Sid(s). 'Pyaar Hi Hona' celebrates the newness of love and the butterflies it gives to you. Whereas 'Bikhra Dil' is about two people separating after trying their best to work a relationship. Both the situations are very practical and happen to a lot of us. Hence the connectivity with the audiences made it work for me.

You recently performed at *Rolling Stone India*'s Women in Creativity event, what was it like to be in a room full of inspiring and entrepreneurial women?
This was one magical evening. To be able to physically meet all the women I've been inspired by and performing my originals in front of them was so empowering. Moreover, them coming and appreciating my music, grooving to it, just shot my confidence levels so high. Shows how the world is becoming a better place for women. I think there's nothing more commendable than women supporting other women.

Why do you think amplifying women in creativity is important?
Women in our society have always been very undervalued. Lockdown brought the big change that was needed. So many women entrepreneurs emerged, more women indie artists came up with their music because they all had the time to sit with themselves. So, if we look at it carefully, it took them this long because they were never told how beautifully blessed they are. And just when they had the time, they could see their own capabilities and gathered the courage to bring it out to the world. Imagine what magic would happen if they have the support!

What qualities does it take to achieve success in a creative field?
I don't think there can ever be a fixed success mantra. It's a very subjective concept. What I believe in and definitely works for me is [to be] consistent and persistent and I plan to stick to that. Also, stick to your roots!

What do you have coming up next through 2023?
Just when 2022 was ending, I finalized my dream deal with Sony Music India. So, 2023 and the years to come are only going to be star years. To start with, I have an EP coming up which is a musical reflection of who I am as an artist. It's all folk concepts that we have curated into originals. Because I have grown up listening to folk and experiencing the culture so closely, this is a very special journey. Also, I'll be putting some originals on my own channel. So really looking forward to what's happening next. ANURAG TAGAT

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

An Alien Invasion Centers Around Anchit Magee's New Video For 'This Is Our Life'

The track is off the Noida singer-songwriter's sophomore EP 'Modern Art'

Soon after releasing his six-track debut Hindi EP *Adhoore* last year, Noida singer-songwriter Anchit Magee began working on its follow-up, the five-track record *Modern Art*. With the title track already out, Magee has also released a second single from the EP in the shape of the indie-rock track "This Is Our Life."

According to the artist, the energetic and uplifting track "speaks to the desire to break free from society and forge a path of one's own." Magee adds, "The lyrics reflect that seize the day mentality and the realization that if this is the only life I have, I must make it my own." Sonically, the track includes bright guitars, catchy melodies as well as groovy drums from Madhav Mehta and shimmery organ parts by Nigel Joe Harris. The song has been mixed and mastered by Adamya Bajaj.

The light-hearted music video accompanying "This Is Our Life" has been directed by Aditya Rahul and stars Chirag Chaturvedi, Tanya Gulati and Harshil Tewatia who are seen on screen fighting an alien invasion. "The shoot was a blast, with things going wrong regularly, as is expected. But we came together to make a video that we're all incredibly proud of, and one that is very special," says Magee.

The rest of *Modern Art* is set to release on June 15th. Talking about what listeners can expect from the other tracks on the record, the musician says, "The songs explore different facets of modern human relationships, ending up as a bittersweet reflection on the complexities of love in modern times." Once this release cycle is over, Magee plans to release singles in both Hindi and English. He says, "There's always something new and better on the horizon, that's the excitement of working in music." DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Irfana On New Song 'Sheila Silk': 'It's A Tribute to Women Who Are Very Sexually Empowered'

The artist has also released a blazing music video to accompany the track

After releasing a number of bops through the years such as the rhythmic "2 Pills," the fast-paced "Program," the hypnotic "Southside Menace" and 2021's four-track EP Ko-Lab with fellow artist Taslina, Kodaikanal-bred rapper Irfana is now out with a brand-new track, the scorching "Sheila Silk," out via Def Jam India.

In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Irfana discusses how she signed for Def Jam India, the inspiration behind "Sheila Silk," what she has coming up next and more. Read below.

What can you tell us about your new song "Sheila Silk"?
'Sheila Silk' is a tribute to South Indian film icon Silk Smita, but it's also a tribute to icons like her in Indian cinema. Women who are entertainers and they're very sexually empowered, they're like sex symbols almost. So 'Sheila Silk' is about taking control of that power because women like that end up entertaining the masses and giving a lot of themselves to the entertainment world. This is about me being a woman and taking control of that. It was just a really fun song to do also.

"'Sheila Silk' is a tribute to South Indian film icon Silk Smita, but it's also a tribute to icons like her in Indian cinema."

How did the deal with Def Jam India come about?
I was signed to Found Out Official for a while before the Def Jam contract came up. Then the song that we dropped with them, 'Southside Menace,' did pretty well and then they offered me the Def Jam contract. So that's kind of a dream come true.

What has it been like working with the label?
It's been incredible since the beginning, they've been incredibly supportive. I had some hard times in between as well, but they're more than a label when it comes to things like that, they've been there throughout the whole thing, patiently waiting for when I was ready to drop music again. I think their belief system and their support system is what I love most, so it's been quite great.

What was your experience like putting the music video for the track together?
It was really fun. It took a long time. It was the first time we did like a big, big production. So obviously there was like a lot of learning curves along the way. We shot it in Bangalore, we had a bunch of people that were already experienced in the industry join us, collaborate and co-create and things like that. So it was a really fun eye-opening learning experience.

What else do you have planned for the rest of the year?
There's a few releases that we're working on right now, which I'm really excited about. We're actually about to shoot the next Def Jam release, so I'm really excited to bring that to you and that will be a little bit more like my older sound. But this year I will be experimenting a lot too. DAVID BRITTO

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

Alan Walker's Ballad 'Not You' Has Gained New Life in South East Asia

The DJ-producer's 2021 song with vocalist Emma Steinbakken has led to increased streams in countries like Indonesia and India and Walker's open to Bollywood jumping in on it

COURTESY OF MER/OUTDUSTRY

For all the grandiosity that every dance music song aspires for, Alan Walker's 2021 song "Not You" was different. Teaming up with Emma Steinbakken, the song from the album *World of Walker* is pretty much devoid of any dancefloor-oriented elements, with the Norwegian DJ-producer focusing instead of string arrangements, keys and vocals.

Nearly two years on – in which Walker has released two *Walkerverse* EPs – "Not You" is regaining popularity, particularly in South East Asian countries like Indonesia due to social media platforms like TikTok. Walker was even invited to perform the song on *Indonesian Idol* recently, with the song reportedly adding nearly a million streams per day. As an artist who holds the distinction of being the most-followed DJ on Spotify, Walker is the last person you'll hear say something trite like how it's not about the numbers. He terms the renewed rise in streaming numbers for "Not You" as an "unexpected U-turn in music streaming that's indescribable." He adds over a call that the stats and numbers help focus more on content and building interaction with fans in countries around the world, including India and Indonesia.

Beyond the numbers is Walker's own conviction in the song, which he felt didn't get its due when it first came out. "It didn't get the same impact when we released it. It was a very slow song but it also slowly blew up over time. It's exactly what I was hoping for, at some point," the DJ says about the success of "Not You." He admits he's always releasing songs with a "powerful drop" but "Not You" was "purely piano and strings for a calm, soothing song." He adds, "The lyrics and the whole momentum of the song, I feel like is very emotional and powerful. It has a very strong meaning to it and I think that's what caught on.

Walker has spoken previously about how EDM reaching countries like India slightly later than the West has helped make his music more popular in the region, but it's also that he capitalized on the geographical interest by showing up early in his career to tour here. The DJ says whenever he plays any of the larger electronic festivals around the world, he'll "pretty much always see an Indian flag in the crowd." He adds, "That shows how much the music means for India. Having the opportunity to come to India from Norway is always incredible. I was always coming to India, China and Indonesia in the very beginning, instead of going to America and all that. That was the main reason for the connect to those countries."

"It ['Not You'] didn't get the same impact when we released it. It was a very slow song but it also slowly blew up over time."

The DJ has had his stint on primetime Indonesian T.V., but one wonders how long it might be before Walker shows up on Indian screens and become even more of a household name. "I've heard about how huge Bollywood and all that is," he says with a laugh. After Indonesia, he's "very open" to making a Bollywood version of "Not You" as well. Walker says, "It can be awesome." Interestingly, Indian producers like Gravero and the duo Sush & Yohan have already associated to drop mashups which crossover with songs like "Jeena Jeena" by Sachin-Jigar and Atif Aslam (from the movie *Badlapur*), plus "Jab Tak" by Armaan Malik and Amaal Mallik from *M.S. Dhoni — The Untold Story*.

On the touring front, Walker is also keen to go to more cities within India and do bigger shows, which the country is ripe for after EDM artist Martin Garrix's wide-ranging eight-city tour earlier this year. "We'd like to just do a much more wider India tour. The potential and everything is there. I think we really could pull something off," he adds.

Most of the year will be markedly less hectic shows for the DJ, though. "We're taking a little bit more relaxed here on the touring front," he says. There's a total of around 75 shows planned, compared to the estimated 110 shows he took on in 2022. "But we have a ton of new music coming up and I'm super excited to show the world. Hopefully, I'll be stopping by India sooner than later," Walker says. ANURAG TAGAT

Norwegian Singer Astrid S: 'I Feel Very Privileged to Be Living My Dream'

The artist talks to us about her latest single 'Darkest Hour' and releasing versions of the song with Indonesia musician Keisya Levronka and Pakistani singer Asim Azhar

RECENTLY, NORWEGIAN SINGER-SONGWRITER Astrid S was in Mumbai and we caught up with the artist to talk to her about being part of the music industry for 10 years, her new song "Darkest Hour," her tour plans, performing in India and more. Read excerpts below:

This year marks 10 years since you began releasing music, what's the journey been like for you?
It's been crazy. I think I'm still in shock that I get to do this and I don't take anything for granted. I feel very privileged to be living my dream. But it's been a lot of hard work. It's challenging because the music industry is changing. So much so you have to be very adaptable, but it's so much fun. I love that. It's such a challenge and it never gets easier. Like you think you've cracked the code. If it's writing a song or a campaign or whatever it is, it's such a victory when it works and it connects with people.

What was the music scene like in Norway while you were growing up?
I grew up kind of in the north of Norway. Where I'm from, there wasn't a big music scene, but you know we had music school where you could play. I played in the marching band for many years. I played the flute, but international music was a big part, radio and CDs are what we listened to. I was very influenced by ABBA and Britney Spears.

You released a new EP earlier this, *Felt Cute Might Delete Later* – what can you tell me about that record and the songs on it?
So that EP is a collection of songs that I wrote years ago that I was never able to put out because it didn't fit in with an album. So, I was like, you know what I really want to put this out because I love it so much. So, it's four very different songs from different times in my career, and I guess I would say they feel a little bit like they're a bit more outgoing and experimental and fun.

Your latest single is "Darkest Hour" – there are three versions out, what can you tell me about this song?
I put out 'Darkest Hour' with me first, and then I have a growing fan base in Indonesia, India and Pakistan. So I really wanted to travel and visit the country and also, I'm a big fan of Asim Azhar and Keisya Levronka. She's from Indonesia and Asim is from

> **"I feel very privileged to be living my dream."**

Pakistan and they both wanted to do a version of the song with me, which was amazing. I knew them from before, and I had a list of my dream collaborators. Keisya was at the top of my list for Indonesia and Azim was on my other list.

What has your first trip to India been like?
It's been a little bit of a culture shock in the best way. It's very crowded, a lot of noise everywhere, but everyone is so friendly and the food is amazing and I guess the purpose for this trip is to meet my team here and to meet some fans and do interviews. I'm really excited to come back.

You have a busy tour schedule, what can you tell me about your upcoming shows?
This year I'm doing a festival tour in Norway and then I'm releasing my second album, so I will be doing a bigger tour for the album. I finished writing the songs for the album and I'm still working on finalizing it.

Any plans to perform in India?
I hope I get to play here for my next tour, or maybe even a festival. That would be amazing.

Any message for your Indian fans?
I would say to them that I appreciate their support and they're very active on social media, which I love. Lots of messages and comments and I'm really excited to come back and meet them all. DAVID BRITTO

Mumbai Singer-Songwriter Diya Maeve Explores Love on Debut EP

The five-track 'For the Lovers' includes acoustic pop and indie-pop tunes

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

After teasing her five-track debut EP *For the Lovers* with the singles "Me, You, & the Stars" (2022) and "Jupiter's Moon" (2023), Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Diya Maeve has now released the full record. In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, she talks about the making of the EP, the stories behind the songs and more. Read below.

When did work on your debut EP begin?

I properly began working on my EP in February 2022. But prior to recording the songs, I had already finalized which ones were going to be on the EP. I've always had a habit of fully working on a song and then moving to the next step of working on it with a producer. Hence, I had written many songs, especially during the pandemic. Once I had decided which songs I wanted on the EP according to the storyline and concept I was going for, I started working on recording them properly.

What can you tell me about the EP?

My main aim was this – to tell a story through the EP, with each song acting like a chapter. I wanted to tell a story about love. Moreover, I also wanted to incorporate something along the lines of, if one is broken, one goes through a storm, they can find a home at the end of it, it was all leading to a home that they had been looking for.

I first started writing songs after getting inspired by Taylor Swift's songwriting and storytelling. Over the years, I've also discovered artists like Phoebe Bridgers, Mitski and Lana Del Rey, who inspire me. Hence, storytelling and songwriting have been my comfort every day. I wanted to create a record that told a story, hoping everyone listening to it could find a little story of their own in it.

What plans do you have to promote the record?

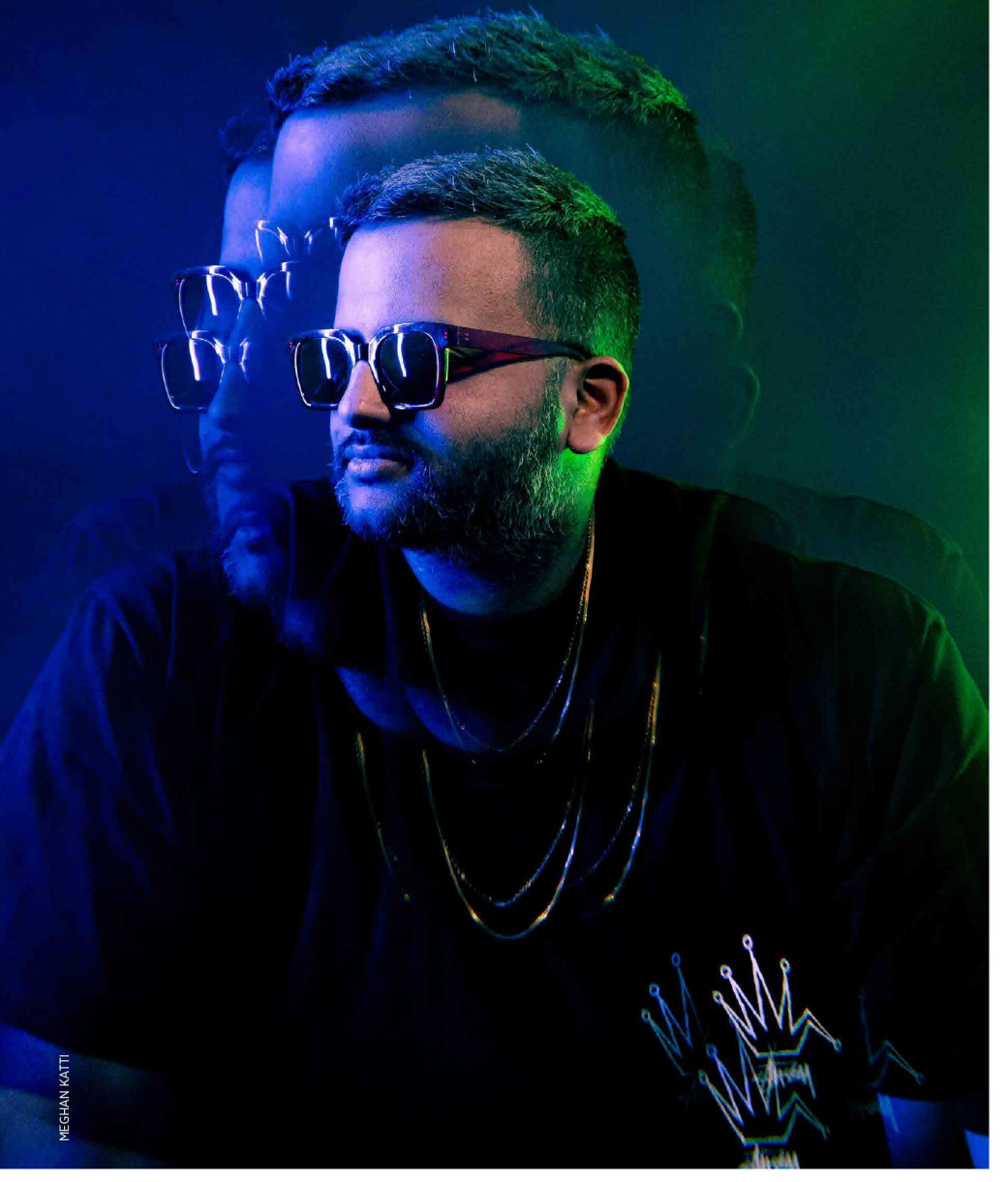
At the moment, I plan to play my originals at gigs, which will be promoted on my socials. Other than that, I'm also working on acoustic versions of songs on the EP, and videos accompanying them.

What's next?

After the EP, I plan to start working on creating some drafts of new songs I've been writing! I want to explore more, be as creative as possible, and listen to different genres as well, to increase my knowledge on how I could perfectly create a vision of the soundscape and production for my future songs. I'll mostly work on them as singles rather than a whole record, as each of them have their own concept. DAVID BRITTO

Hashbass Enlists Blackstratblues on New Enigmatic Song 'Infinite Worlds'

The pair previously collaborated on 'For Anita' in 2020



MEGHAN KATTI

AFTER HIS SPECIALLY CURATED SET called House of Hashbass at Lollapalooza India in Mumbai earlier this year, New Delhi-bred bassist and producer Harshit Misra aka Hashbass has been producing music for various other artists, contributing to Coke Studio Bharat and has even been tweaking old songs and learning new music too. He says, "[I've also been] taking care of my mind and body, which has been the biggest task."

With two EPs out last year (the six-track *Fruits* and the two-track *Arcade*), Misra is now out with his latest offering, the dystopian "Infinite Worlds," which also features Mumbai-bred and Auckland-based guitarist Warren Mendonsa aka Blackstratblues.

"Infinite Worlds" began to take shape during the pandemic when Misra found a patch of one of his favorite VST (Virtual Studio Technology) plugins. In addition, the 1998 film *Blade* also played its part in the making of the track. Misra says, "Every time I saw Wesley Snipes walk into a club I felt like I needed to make a song that was dark and mysterious yet very loud – just like *Blade*!"

"Warren is probably one of the most professional musicians and producers, working with him is a breeze."

Misra previously worked with Mendonsa on his debut solo single, "For Anita," which also featured artists such as seasoned singer Shubha Mudgal and multi-instrumentalist Nikhil Mawkin. On collaborating with the guitarist once more, the bassist says, "Warren is probably one of the most professional musicians and producers. I know working with him is a breeze, he is very clear with his approach to everything that way and he is always spot on with what's required and what's not. All in all an amazing experience, as always." The track includes eerie soundscapes, vocal samples, heavy synths, Hashbass' nuanced production touch as well as Mendonsa's slick fretwork that helps lift the song further.

Next, Hashbass is gearing up to release a new EP entitled *Solo at Your Party* this July. On what folks can expect from the record, he says, "[It] is very close to my heart [and] It pushes boundaries with my music." In the meantime there's more production, composing and arranging work in the pipeline for other artists while the musician is also plotting to scale up his live sets at future gigs. DAVID BRITTO

Ira Sharma Addresses Being Taken for Granted on New Song 'Say You're Sorry'

The track follows the New Delhi-bred artist's 2022 single 'Shy'

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

AFTER RELEASING HER SHIMMERY pop-fueled track called "Shy" last year, New Delhi-bred and Boston-based singer-songwriter Ira Sharma has kept herself quite busy. Earlier this year, she collaborated with artists ZUNN STONE and Hazerbeam on the electro-pop song "Sidewalks" while also learning how to produce and engineer her own songs in addition to writing them. She says, "Thanks to being a music major in Music Production and Engineering and Songwriting at Berklee College of Music, Boston, I have not only been able to build my skills in those areas, but I have also been collaborating with fellow artists and producers in Boston a lot."

Now, Sharma is out with her newest offering, the pop single "Say You're Sorry." In this interview with *Rolling Stone India*, Sharma talks to us about the new song, her forthcoming debut EP and more. Read below.

When did your new song "Say You're Sorry" begin to take shape?

Shortly after I released 'Shy,' I began producing "Say You're Sorry" for one of my music production assignments at Berklee, for which we had to self-produce an original song and that's when 'Say You're Sorry' was born. I produced the beat in Ableton [digital audio workstation] and also top-lined it. Within a matter of a few weeks, I recorded vocals and finished producing the song before handing it to my mixing and mastering engineer, Yuvraj Singh.

What can you tell me about the song?

I was deeply inspired by my previous relationship to come up with lyrics that fearlessly addressed the issue of being taken for granted in a relationship. When you keep forgiving them but they still repeat their behavior over and over again, It's obvious they're okay with hurting you and it gets to the point where their apologies have lost all meaning to you. That's the message of this song. The way I've sung it and the way the melody goes, if you sing along to it, you too will feel a sense of personal power in coming to terms with the fact that your relationship is not working, and that's okay.

I belted out the lyrics to vent my feelings with uptempo drums and guitars in the background to paint a bright picture. because why not celebrate being liberated from a toxic relationship?

What's next?

Up next is a debut EP of my original songs. I have written so many songs over the past few years and I can't wait to share them with the world. Several single releases are also lined up on which I have collaborated with artists and producers of Berklee. Recently, I've also been rehearsing with my band for my first-ever concert at Berklee on June 30th where I'll be performing original music as well as covers. DAVID BRITTO

Manuka Releases Poignant New Song 'Shh... Be Quiet'

The U.K.-bred and Goa-based artist has also put out a spoken word piece alongside the track

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

WHILE GROWING UP IN THE U.K., singer-songwriter Manuka was always interested in the arts whether that would be writing poetry or short stories or even picking up the harmonium and singing. After studying Hindustani Classical music in Kolkata, Manuka moved back to the U.K. where she worked in the mental health sector. She says, "It was around this time where songwriting became a huge part of my life because it gave me the means to self-express and reflect on my life experiences and also to use as a tool to help others." After releasing her debut single "Baggy T" and performing around the U.K., Manuka came back to India to play gigs in 2019 and eventually settled in Goa. Since then, she's released more music and is now out with her latest emotive track called "Shh... Be Quiet."

Manuka penned the new song in 2020. Talking about the lyrics, she says, "The song starts off with the first verse expressing a confusing state of mind when dealing with change and the fear of change. In the second verse, there is some light to the song where there's realization and acceptance to how unique the mind is, that experiences are individual therefore the healing is also individual." She adds, "Then as the chorus comes in it is broken and incomplete which highlights the main point that the process to feeling better is not always easy, and fulfilling, but just as complicated and unpredictable as the rest of the experience." Sonically, the track includes hypnotic plucked acoustic guitar parts as well as tabla playing from Vishnu Vijayan and Manuka's calming vocals.

Along with the song, Manuka has also released a spoken word piece which is her way of bringing her listeners in. "I felt that for a listener to truly listen I would need a way to invite them into the song. This way whoever is listening is doing so intently and can potentially be open to an experience of self-reflection," she says.

Up next, Manuka plans on organizing an intimate gig in Goa during the monsoon that will see her combine various mediums of creative expression. She says, "This would hopefully be the beginning of more collaborative pieces." There's also more new music on the way. The artist adds, "I am eager to share more songs." DAVID BRITTO

Shrae Addresses Chronic Illness on New Song 'Strawberry Pancakes'

The track is the Mumbai-based singer-songwriter's first release since last year's 'A Game For Two'

COURTESY OF THE ARTIST

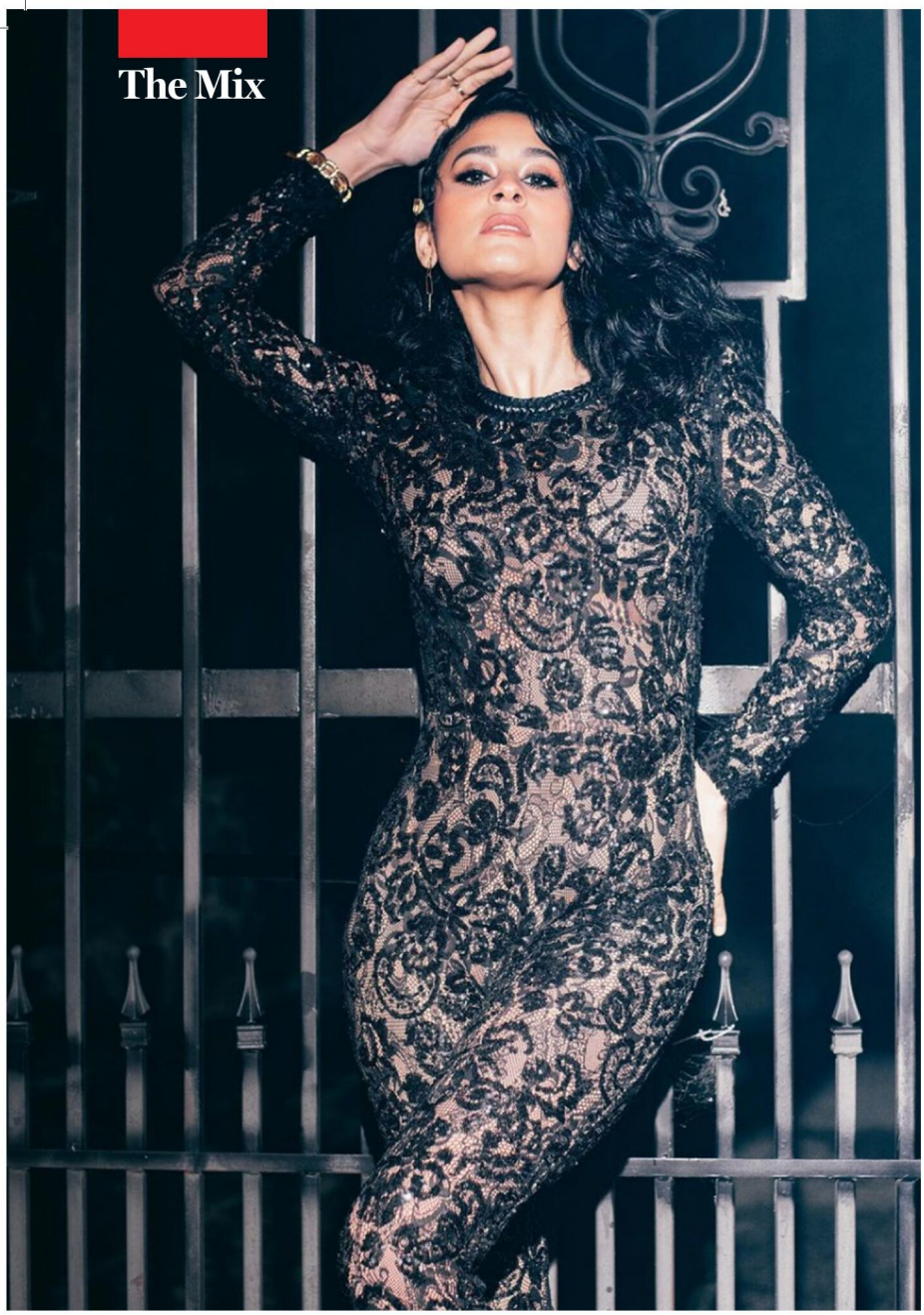
After releasing her effervescent debut single "A Game For Two" in 2022, Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Shrae graduated from music school and is now a faculty member at the same institute, the city-based NMIMS School of Performing Arts. She's also been writing music with her band Jazzafools and played a number of gigs across India. She says, "I also composed music for some projects and did some very interesting sessions, it's been a hectic yet wholesome year." Now, Shrae is out with her sophomore single in the shape of the smooth "Strawberry Pancakes."

The artist wrote the song as an exercise for her lyric writing class last year. "My object was 'painkillers' because they resonated the most to me at that point of time in life," says the singer-songwriter. Through the song, Shrae sings about her chronic illness called endometriosis. "The more I kept it within me, the more it needed to get out from my system and voila! 'Strawberry Pancakes' is a song about hope, resilience and pain. I hope it brings some kind of awareness in any little way possible." The track includes Shrae's brand of jazz, soul and blues while her powerful vocals stand out across the song.

"'Strawberry Pancakes' is a song about hope, resilience and pain."

Shrae worked with producer/multi-instrumentalist Raag Sethi at Ahmedabad's Compass Box Studio. Sethi contributed guitar and bass to the song while drummer Shivang Kapadia and keyboardist Kandarp Kavishwar also performed on the track. "It [the recording process] was so much fun because we added so many things spontaneously and it just somehow worked," says Shrae.

Shrae is lining up more music to be released this year while also putting out material with her band Jazzafools too. I almost disappeared last year after releasing one song and I don't want to do that again," she says. DAVID BRITTO



JONTI SHEPHERD

Shuba: 'I Love Singing Catchy Melodies That Make People Feel Bold, Empowered and Free'

The Indo-American artist's newest release is the fierce 'Hot Girls'

GROWING UP IN THE U.S., INDO-AMERICAN singer Shuba was exposed to all kinds of music thanks to her parents. From Carrie Underwood and Shania Twain to A.R. Rahman and Eminem as well as classic rock and mainstream pop, Shuba heard it all. "My dad was the main person who encouraged us to sing. He saw potential in me and my sister to perform on stage and used every opportunity to have us sing at least one song in front of an audience," she says.

We caught up with the singer to talk about her new release Hot Girls, what the songs on the record mean to her, where she's taking her sound in the future and more. Read below.

When did work on your latest offering "Hot Girls" begin?

I started "Hot Girls" in late 2022 after going through a breakup that really opened my eyes to how narrow-mindedly I was approaching relationships. I still have a long way to go and a lot to learn about setting higher standards for myself but I think I needed to understand what sorts of traps I shouldn't fall into if I actually want something meaningful with someone in the future.

As part of the record for Hot Girls, you've released the title track, "Bad Date," "Come Here" and have one more song as part of this project. What can you tell me about the tracks and what they mean to you?

I'll be honest, there is no direct or profound connection between the songs. I'm not really someone who writes in terms of a singular event. It's more so that I go through different seasons of my life where certain experiences happen to and for me. This particular season is me saying hi to the world with a cohesive sound. I make music that becomes the soundtrack to my life, and three of the songs represent my anxious attachment towards a relationship but unwillingness to get out, my feelings of pettiness after it ended, and my moments of growth and realization after it.

The fourth song is just a bop. It's this anthemic and loud ode to my parents as well as all the other people who believe in the American Dream and in their own individuality. It's a reclaiming song and it has a big message that has a lot to do with feeling out of place growing up but realizing that the tables turn.

What's next?

I genuinely love my music and the sound I'm crafting. It's classic pop and some rap mixed with a hint of Bollywood flair. I love the percussion my producer HOMI uses, which is also very Timbaland-inspired. I love throwing in simple ragas and taking people out of the standard pop vocal sound. Most importantly, I just love listening to and singing catchy melodies that make people feel bold, empowered, and free. DAVID BRITTO

Mix - Shuba.indd 18 24/07/23 11:20 PM

What We Learned About Music in Egypt at XP Music Futures' XChange Cairo

Amid what some called an "unique cultural moment," the country is now a veteran at the table when it comes to the growing Middle East and North African music industry

Hassan Abouelrouss at the MDLBEAST roadshow event in Cairo in May 2023.

A panel discussion in progress at XP Music Futures' XChange Cairo event in Egypt in May 2023.

As annual conference XP Music Futures arranged its XChange Cairo workshop in Egypt in late May, they realized they were about to deal with a culturally different kind of music industry personnel in their sessions.

Saudi Arabia-centered XP Music Futures' head of programming Yasmine Rasool says, "We were excited about Cairo because they're known to be so brash with their comments and they go all out and be like, 'This is my opinion!' We were told the workshops are going to get a bit heated up, because everyone has such strong opinions."

We're seated outside the main room where XChange Cairo's workshops are taking place, in an upscale sort of co-working and gallery space in Egypt's capital. From the importance of safe spaces to the shortage of managers and labels and even eco-friendlier events, the room is full of opinions from the new and established voices of Egypt – a country that often evokes ideas of civilization, revolution and more. "It's like a focus group," Rasool says.

Launched last year, XChange has since also set up in Amman and Abu Dhabi, leading up to the main XP Music Futures conference in Riyadh in December. What feels like a gathering of voices and talent from Egypt also seems to be an extended hand from Saudi Arabia's growing music and entertainment industry, one that has the blessings of the government. Call it a flex of soft power or just necessary PR, XP Music Futures is trying to build bridges in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) region and they received a warm, even if slightly discerning welcome in Cairo.

At the panel discussions featuring venues like Cairo Jazz Club or event organizers, DJ-producers and talent managers, there are calls to push Egypt's music culture without "external validation." Platforms like Scene Noise are more than happy to amplify voices, including DJ-producer and event organizer Zeina. Fellow organizer Tito el Kachab – a founder of the Sandbox Festival – wants to see more stability and collaborations between countries.

There are about 25 million people living in Cairo and they certainly don't sleep – 1:30 am on a Friday night and the city is buzzing, all the bright lights from hotels, casinos and more shining onto the river Nile, where boats are ferrying tourists and residents alike. Inside the invite-only open-bar party at a nightclub called The Museum, artists like indie act Juno, producer Hatem El Chiati and DJ Vinyl Mode showcase a range of sounds that are influenced by Arabic music as well as their global inspirations. On day two of our trip, XP Music Futures' parent company, MDLBEAST, puts together another showcase at the headquarters of Cairo-based label Yellow Tape Records.

"We were excited about Cairo because they're known to be so brash with their comments," says Saudi Arabia-centered XP Music Futures' head of programming Yasmine Rasool.

It brings in seasoned Saudi Arabia-origin DJ-producer Cosmicat and one of Egypt's most well-received pop artists in recent times, Hassan Abouelrouss. He's an actor and filmmaker as well, which means he can be a creative tour de force in this intimate living room space that's turned into a dancefloor. The likes of Abouelrouss took from traditional Egyptian music styles like shaabi (also called chaabi) and its evolved form Mahraganat, which has a heavy electronic element mixed with rhythms made popular at weddings and street processions.

Abouelrouss has charm and comedic value alike, so it's no surprise to hear him say earlier on in a panel discussion at Yellow Tape Records that he never tires. This was a point he made in contrast to Cosmicat's mindful advice about encouraging musicians to take care of their mental health, but also give music as many years as they can to see it grow in regions like MENA.

Egypt has produced several stars in the Arab music world over the years – from Amr Diab decades ago to current rap stars like Wegz – who got a hit song for the FIFA World Cup 2022 in Qatar called "Ezz Al Arab" – and Afroto and Wingii. Hip-hop, like in India, has steadily grown in Egypt, even making its way onto radio airwaves. From huge Spotify billboards of local artists to modern electronic remixes of traditional tunes, Egypt's music industry is clearly pulling in several directions and considering they have a long history of producing the Arab music world's top stars, that won't stop any time soon. With conversations like those that took place at XChange Cairo, it's evident that there's a lot that the rest of the Middle East has to gain from it as well. Rasool says it's all about providing the right tools to everyone who's willing to be a part of it.

She says events like XP Music Futures and more are a culmination of decades of artists being part of the underground circuit in countries like Saudi Arabia. Asked about what MDLBEAST is offering, Rasool adds, "Now what we're trying to do is create that foundation so that people can succeed in their career, because you will have the rights to your IP. And I think that's one form of boundary, but also boundaries in cross-cultural exchange." From education to partnerships to untangling licensing to mentorship for women, it's an ambitious pitch for inclusivity in the MENA region. "I think what I love doing is connecting people and XP is a continuation of that; just making sure there are projects happening, cultural exchange happening and maybe that people get a different perspective from getting to know each other. I think that's what's necessary," Rasool says. **ANURAG TAGAT**

The Growing Appeal of Fantasy K-Dramas

The way we see these dramas depends on their arcs and characters, so fully realized that aspects of fantasy are seldom challenged

BY DEBASHREE DUTTA

A FANTASY K-DRAMA, ALBEIT exceedingly implausible, may provide a refreshing break from mundane routine for an engaging viewing experience. Its artful narration, when combined with the surreal or similar elements as a central theme, or subject, could make the context look real. And it is the most profound thrill of all: to look forward to the inconceivable. The way we see these dramas depends on their arcs and characters, so fully realized that aspects of fantasy are seldom challenged.

They specialize in worldbuilding—creating imagined spaces. *The King: Eternal Monarch* (2020), a whirling chronicle of two parallel universes, is an analogous instance. As he enters the Republic of Korea (in a parallel reality), we witness King Lee Gon (Lee Min-ho) of the Kingdom of Corea facing Cop Jeong Tae-eul (Kim Go-eun), whom he recognizes with an ID card he had when his father was slain. On the other side, the assassin of Lee Ho (Lee Gon's father)—Lee Rim (Lee Jung-jin), Lee Gon's half-uncle—is rallying troops covertly while navigating the two divergent realms.

This drama is notable for creating a fictional setting with cogent characteristics—its past, present, and environment—in the kingdom of Corea. A far cry from the usual, its depiction of alternate spaces, times, and hypotheses indeed piques the imagination. It's a brainteaser and incredibly unlikely in totality, but everything comes together in the epilogue. Ignoring some conflicting reviews and the flak it received for reportedly a few historical blunders, awe-inspiring performances, precise film craft, and a hypnotic OST lavishly highlight *The King*—a fantasy that fuels its great attraction as a magnificent retreat for the viewers.

Due to its romanticism and optimism-based roots, K-fantasy's appeal strikes in a unique vein. Let's rehash three cult favorite K-dramas in a comparable light: *My Love from the Star* (2013), *The Legend of the Blue Sea* (2016), and *Guardian: The Lonely* and *Great God* (2016).

Do Min-joon swooped through the stars, sweeping Cheon Song-yi off her feet in a heart-fluttering *My Love from the Star*, pulsing with romance, enigma, and splendor. The top-notch cast magnetizes thanks to their efficiency, notably Kim Soo-hyun and Jun Ji-hyun, as Do and Cheon. While Kim's unblemished portrayal meets the mood of the show, Jun speaks with her starry façade and all-vulnerable heart, pining for love.

> These fictional tales provide a world in which we can explore what's beyond the boundaries of reality.

The series centers on a superpowered alien, Do, who was inadvertently stranded on Earth and shocked to find Hallyu star Cheon living next door. He repeatedly steps into her distressed life to save her, with only three months until his return to his own. When reality dawns, a unique experience evolves, and love seeps in. The drama's take on the scenario is nuanced enough for simple comprehension. Originality and execution led to its global success, while also contributing to the expansion of the Hallyu wave.

PHOTO COURTESY OF TVN; SBS; SBS TV

The Legend of the Blue Sea's marked enchantment is built on hope, the fantasy aside; it unmistakably offers catharsis, a coping strategy questioning the viability of a Joseon-era mermaid in contemporary Seoul. Indeed, it's a singular narrative, perhaps unlike any other I continue to reflect on. My tryst with it also stems from the romance of Heo Joon-jae (Lee Min-ho), a conman, and Shim Cheong (Jun Ji-hyun), the mermaid. Based on myth, unrequited love, and re-birth, the plot is ingeniously stitched in with flashbacks of their Joseon-era identities, Se Hwa (the mermaid), and Kim Dam-ryeong (the town chief). Lee and Jun's consuming rapport headlined with Jun gaining added notoriety as the mystical mermaid.

Living calls for fantasy. Even if it lets us escape from reality, it also necessarily aids in understanding it. A fantasy K-drama's core value is faith. Its making is such that, through its fundamental concepts and ramifications, it motivates. *Guardian: The Lonely* and *Great God* can be the case here. When I watch a show like that, I enjoy

its mysticism, mystery, and romance, of course. Here, an eternal goblin (Gong Yoo) seeks his bride (Kim Go-eun), the only individual who can pull out an invisible sword that's piercing his chest. It's a flight of fancy—a brilliant one at that—with this beautiful message underneath: a profound desire, endurance, and faith above all lead to what we're looking for, and that love is all-encompassing; it can move mountains.

Over the years, the renown of fantasy K-dramas has surged, resulting in the release of countless comparable superhits—from the earlier ones, like *My Girlfriend Is a Gumiho* (2010), *Secret Garden* (2010), *Master's Sun* (2013), *Moon Lovers: Scarlet Heart Ryeo* (2016), *W* (2016), *Strong Girl Do Bong-soon* (2017), *Hotel Del Luna* (2019), *He Is Psychometric* (2019), and *Extraordinary You* (2019), to the later offerings, like *Tale of the Nine-Tailed* (2020), *The Uncanny Encounter* (2020), *Doom at Your Service* (2021), *My Roommate Is a Gumiho* (2021), *Alchemy of Souls* (2022), *Tale of Nine-Tailed 1938* (2023), the ongoing *See You in My 19th Life* (2023), and more such titles. Some upcoming titles include *Destined with You*, *A Time Called You*, and various others that are highly anticipated.

To cut to the chase, these fictional tales provide a world in which we can explore what's beyond the boundaries of reality. It's an inviting universe of make-believe. We like its utopia, where the possibilities that you and I imagine are realized. And who knows, some of it might come to pass at some point; after all, the most revolutionary realities were made possible by the most unfathomable imaginations. ®

'Concrete Utopia' is Appreciably More: What to Look for in the Upcoming Film

Emotional upheavals will surely permeate this intense disaster thriller. And the repercussions would be colossal, with Lee Byung-hun, Park Seo-joon, and Park Bo-young taking center stage

PHOTO COURTESY OF LOTTE ENTERTAINMENT

When it comes to feeding our appetite for horror and dystopia, K-content continues to lead the pack. Plotlines and production value preserve the grandiosity of the Korean portrayal of an apocalypse brought on by catastrophes. What drives us to this grim subgenre is precisely the thing. I figure the likelihood of an unforeseen tomorrow may be what most piques our curiosity; they are convincing in how we handle them and our coping mechanisms. *Concrete Utopia*—the film at hand by Um Tae-hwa, starring Lee Byung-hun, Park Seo-joon, and Park Bo-young—is a disaster thriller with an analogous tone set for release this August 9.

Centered on Seoul's "Imperial Palace Apartment" survivors, *Concrete Utopia* chronicles the backwash of an epic earthquake that decimates the metropolis, leaving everything in shambles. Accompanying Yeong-tak (Lee), the man in charge of the building residents through the trying times, are public servant Min-sung (Park Seo-joon) and his nurse wife, Myung-hwa (Park Bo-young). It deals with destruction and disaster relief if taken as a standalone film, but I suppose there's also some dark and gallows humor going on, more employed when referencing fatality or circumstances evocative of dying, as in this story.

The ambitious project is a film version of Pleasant Bullying, the second installment of Kim Sung-nik's webtoon. It's quite an attraction that seems technically promising in light of the trailer visuals. Speaking at a press conference for the film, Lee said, "The scope of the movie is huge, along with the sounds and various scenes, so seeing this film in theaters compared to watching it on a TV set will be a different experience in my view." Courtesy *Korea Now*.

The large edifice and its harrowing story in the wake of a cataclysm were painstakingly put together on the film sets, according to the Korean media. It cost the computer graphics team two years to analyze Seoul's topography before integrating it into the work for accuracy, director Um revealed at the press conference. I believe that performers instinctively do well in keeping with the spirit when such care and attention to detail are put into constructing the context. Given that, it stands to reason that the stellar cast will further accentuate the narrative's flair.

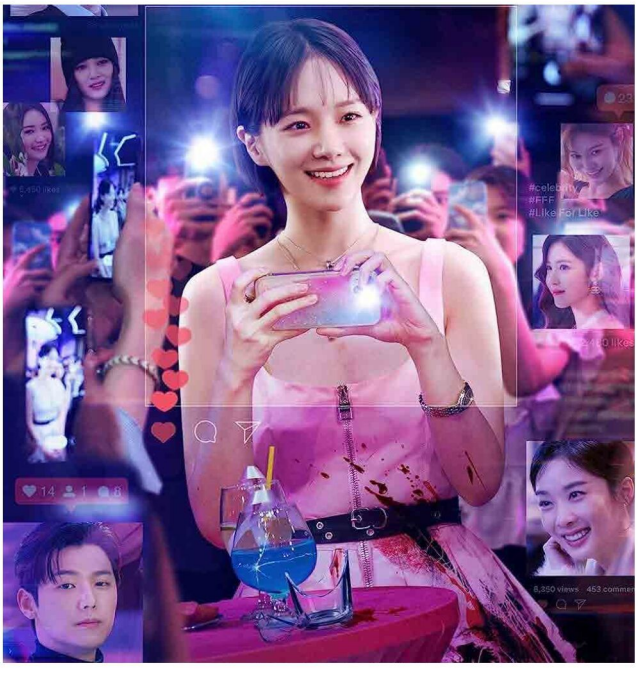
I'm eagerly awaiting its release. Emotional upheavals will surely permeate the intense adrenaline experience. And the repercussions would be colossal, with three superstars taking center stage. Blending realism with state-of-the-art computer graphics, it will serve as the epicenter of mounting suspense, and, braving the tempest, Park Seo-joon and Park Bo-young will pull off acts of awesomeness. But that typical "K-drama romance" may not be happening here; this is their first-ever screen time together—and that matters. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

Actor You Need to Know: Park Gyu-young

The 'Celebrity' star has never been confined to just a few genres or chances, so the sky is her limit, and she is steadily spreading her wings.

Seo Ah-ri (Park Gyu-young), to make it in social media's cutthroat race for fame and fortune, takes chances, unequivocally, boosting her profile and following. Along the way, she grabs the spotlight while also running into its darker realms. This is a riveting tale—*Celebrity* (2023)—relevant given how we engage in social media and its massive impact on our daily lives, with plenty to grasp if you can see past the obvious: the deeper connotations—one being to choose words carefully—for their profundity can be alarming. And at the heart of it all lies Park's subtle portrayal. Here we see common trends in an intriguing context: envy, an itch for control, and toxic human attitudes—played to perfection by the actors, notably Park's facile expressiveness.

I've just completed watching the drama and felt it particularly pertinent to browse through her work. Her career hasn't been so drawn-out to date, yet her scene-



stealing performance in *Celebrity* underlines the acting acumen she owns. Park, in my mind, is an indisputably promising Korean actor, pushing herself to take on bigger challenges with each new project. Technically debuting in a 2016 music video, she took on supporting roles in a string of dramas before cracking the first shot on the big screen with the movies *Wretches* and *Love+Sling* in 2018. As I scroll across her filmography now, it's clear: she has never been confined to just a few genres or chances, so the sky is her limit, and she is steadily spreading her wings.

A few more television drama stints in the following years up until 2020, when she got Nam Ju-ri in the megahit healing romantic-comedy drama *It's Okay to Not Be Okay*, starring Kim Soo-hyun and Seo Yea-ji. Nam Ju-ri is a nurse working with her crush, Moon Gang-tae (Kim), at OK Psychiatric Hospital; her feelings for him are deep but to no avail. Park excels in the role—introverted and naturally envious of others coming close to her love interest. She caught my eye for the first time in this drama. A natural in Ju-ri's skin, she acts so vividly, revealing the thoughts racing through Ju-ri's mind. In the subsequent big-hit horror apocalypse *Sweet Home*, Park costarred with Song Kang and fellow actors as Yoon Ji-soo, the bass player who moves to 'Green Home' when her lover commits suicide.

Her next venture, *The Devil Judge* (2021), a critically acclaimed mystery legal dystopian drama, unfolds in an unstable period when the titular judge, Kang Yo-han (Ji Sung), turns the court into a reality show-like medium and executes offenders with utter severity. Yoon Soo-hyun, a lieutenant in the Regional Investigation Unit, is a key figure here, played by Park. She shows a profound capacity for emotional shifts in the story, something I want to commend her for. Soo-hyun is as gutsy in seeking to expose the inner workings of Yo-han as she is fragile in her feelings for Kim Ga-on (Park Jinyoung), Yo-han's subordinate judge. This romantic bond makes the otherwise bleak premise a little easier to deal with.

Park took on Kim Dali, a scholar who crosses paths with an upstart Jin Moo-hak (Kim Min-jae) in the Netherlands, in the rom-com *Dali & Cocky Prince* (2021), marking her debut lead role in a TV drama. Dali goes home after her father passes away to take charge of her family's faltering art museum. They unexpectedly meet again when Moo-hak, an essential creditor of property, turns in to retrieve the money he owes. Over time, an unexpected romance blossoms between them. As an attractive Dali versed in a variety of subjects, Park shone in her performance just as much as she did in highlighting her flaws, like her lack of domestic skills.

Park smoothly switches from minimal to massive and can be an artist of contrasts. She has clearly been in the driver's seat of how she operates since her inception.

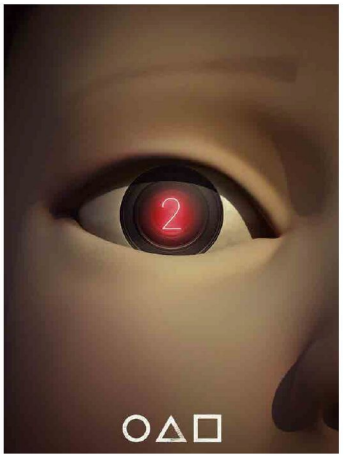
Park, I'd wind up, smoothly switches from minimal to massive and can be an artist of contrasts. She has clearly been in the driver's seat of how she operates since her inception. I'm very curious to see how she comes about in the much-anticipated *Squid Game Season 2*. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

PHOTO COURTESY OF KBS2; NETFLIX

‘Squid Game Season 2’: Its Eclectic Cast Raises Expectations

With the potential for more dramatic disclosures and the stakes and sense of animosity seemingly higher than before, ‘Squid Game Season 2’ is bound to cover a lot more ground than expected.

The much-awaited *Squid Game Season 2* has gotten off to an excellent start. Like an ideal curtain-raiser, Im Si-wan, Kang Ha-neul, Park Sung-hoon, and Yang Dong-geun, together with Lee Jung-jae, Lee Byung-hun, Wi Ha-jun, and Gong Yoo, were unveiled by Netflix as dramatis personae from the second chapter, leaving the air teeming with intrigue. And shortly thereafter, they released eight more names, stoking the frenzy. On the list are Park Gyu-young, Jo Yu-ri, Kang Ae-sim, Lee David, Lee Jin-uk, Choi Seung-hyun (T.O.P, formerly of Big Bang), Roh Jae-won, and Won Ji-an.



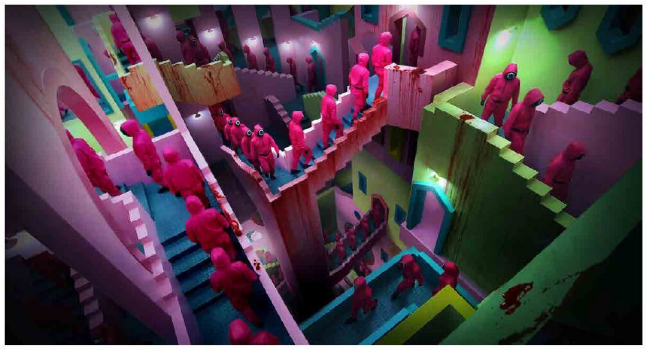
The blood-curdling horror of capitalism, social injustice, inequality, and economic woes in the creator-writer-director Hwang Dong-hyuk’s graphic-grabbing K-drama made us wrestle with reality and human tendencies. Set in Seoul, it goes over desperate, debt-plagued participants’ bids for survival and exorbitant prize money via a series of warped classic Korean children’s games. It doesn’t take long for the participants to realize that losing every game end in death, with each death adding a whopping amount to the total. Seong Gi-hun (Lee Jung-jae) forms alliances with other players, withstanding the shocks of the game, and ultimately prevails on his own. The season closes with Gi-hun choosing to turn around rather than board the plane, leaving blanks that undoubtedly set the stage for an exciting sequel—the one at hand—to be filled in.

Gi-hun’s resolve to return rather than fly to the US was intended to convey—do not get sucked into a system but face it head-on and perhaps rectify what’s wrong—as director Hwang explained in one of his prior interviews with *The Hollywood Reporter*. Therefore, *Squid Game 2* would presumably center on Gi-hun’s plan of action—his confrontation with the creators of the lethal game. Hwang added that he might as well explore the uncharted territory of the frontman (Lee Byung-hun) and his cop brother (Wi Ha-jun), alongside the mysterious recruiter (Gong Yoo), whom we met in the pilot episode.

What draws us most is whether a course of action in this follow-up scenario would give in to repression or serve as a major element of an effort to subvert and oppose the tyranny of power.

With the potential for more dramatic disclosures and the stakes and sense of animosity seemingly higher than before, *Squid Game Season 2* is bound to cover a lot more ground than expected, with an extensive cast of individuals complementing an already harrowing plot. What draws me most, though, is whether a course of action in this follow-up scenario would give in to repression or serve as a major element of an effort to subvert and oppose the tyranny of power.

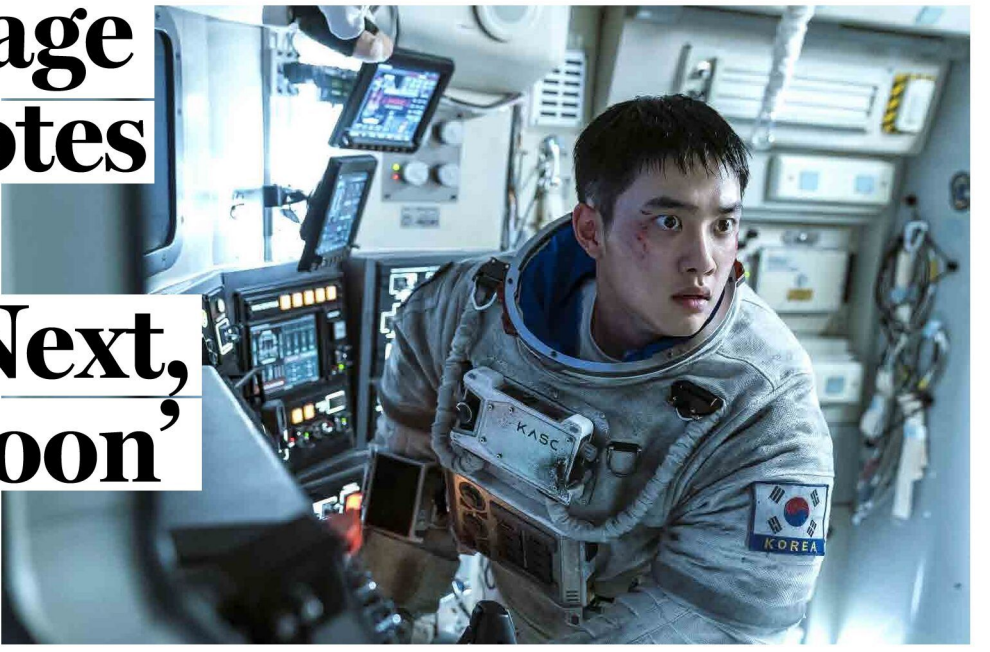
When I watched the first season, I had the following thought: South Korea's quick rebound from the devastation of the Korean War has been evidenced by everything from the ascent of corporate goliaths to the recent invasion of Korean pop culture, including stars like BTS, the nation's vibrant cuisine, and an expanding passion for K-dramas and films. But is *Squid Game* a revelation? casting doubt on the long-term viability of one of Asia's strongest economies? For that matter, it is. Not always will an expanding economy coincide with a strengthening social ethos. In tandem with a host of unstated undertones that question a dog-eat-dog culture, the show is an excellent reminder of that. In bringing the idea to life, it set new standards for conception, novelty, amazing production elements, and cutting-edge storytelling methodology. K-content increasingly predominates consumer viewing preferences, possibly as a result.



Now that season two is gaining steam far in advance of its premiere thanks to its top-notch casting, I only foresee deeper repercussions. I hope "the story about losers," as director Hwang has previously defined *Squid Game*, gets to a more welcoming resolution notwithstanding the heated competition, the lure of money, the supremacy of the potent, the searing facts of the real world, and its abhorrence. **DEBASHREE DUTTA**

PHOTO COURTESY OF NETFLIX

Backstage Anecdotes from D.O.'s Next, 'The Moon'

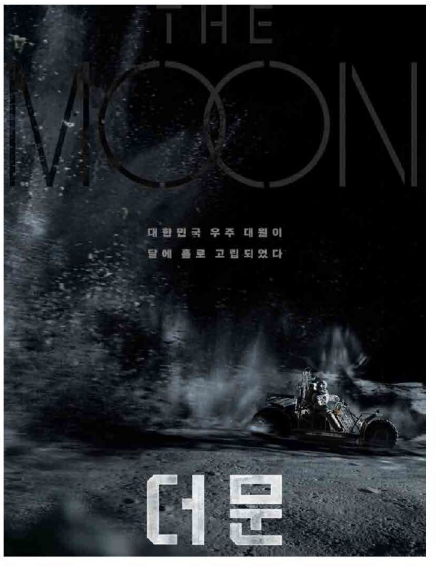


As much as D.O. is drawing attention for the movie, its film craft is also gaining prominence. Director Kim Yong-hwa states: It's immersive, simulating a real space experience.

The moon DOESN'T, in theory, have a dark side. At a similar pace, as it orbits the Earth, it rotates on its own axis. From our vantage point on Earth, we continually observe one side of the moon. Just as much light is left on the other side that we cannot see, it remains bright—our shiny, glittering neighbor—a recurring mystique in fiction works of art and literature, with cinema being one of the commonly employed vehicles of expression.

K-content has branched out into the bargain, expertly implementing the premise of a moon expedition. With the soon-to-be-released space survival thriller movie *The Moon*, Korean cinema returns to lunar space following the masterstroke 2021 sci-fi thriller series Silent Sea—a hazardous 24-hour mission on the moon.

The nucleus of Kim Yong-hwa's *The Moon* comprises Do Kyung-soo (EXO's D.O.), Sol Kyung-gu, and Kim Hee-ae, following a second human spacecraft launched later after Korea's failed maiden manned lunar mission. Hwang Sun-woo (D.O.)—one of the astronauts—is marooned on the moon when it is wrecked by a solar blow. He is now cut off in space. As disaster hits harder, The Naro Space Center turns to Kim Jae-guk (Sol Kyung-gu), its former head, for aid in returning Sun-woo safely.



Since the teaser trailer and, lately, a video outlining what it took to produce the magnum opus was released by *CJ ENM*, excitement for the film has gotten higher. As much as D.O. is drawing attention, its film craft is also gaining prominence. Director Kim states that it should be an immersive experience that he and his team have worked hard on to achieve their aim of depicting in a way that gives the illusion of being in space. "Whether it's costumes or art props, I think you'll enjoy every last detail of their authentic appearance, produced with a high degree of precision," he adds.

Maximum care was taken to accurately replicate the moon and its surface. It was challenging to achieve the right balance of light and darkness for the setting, but excellent art direction, top-notch VFX, and 4K camera work combined to precisely create the desired effect, showing "the space as a space of darkness and fear," in director Kim's words. Given how realistically the scenario is expressed, D.O. asserts, "It was very comfortable to act."

According to the art director, who describes how the spaceship was meticulously built, "I looked up a blueprint or design for the manned spacecraft, put together the basic layout, reached out to the specialists with it, got advice, and made everything accordingly."

The Moon is a singular story of human fortitude and survival in duress amid perhaps the most hostile environment—space—and about hope—striving so desperately to save someone from the crisis.

The Moon is a singular story of human fortitude and survival in duress amid perhaps the most hostile environment—space—and about hope—striving so desperately to save someone from the crisis. And that is recorded in stunning clarity. The film promises to be the finest at all of this, simulating a real space experience supplemented by incomparable cast work. *The Moon* hits theaters on August 2, 2023. DEBASHREE DUTTA

PHOTO COURTESY OF CJ ENM

RollingStone

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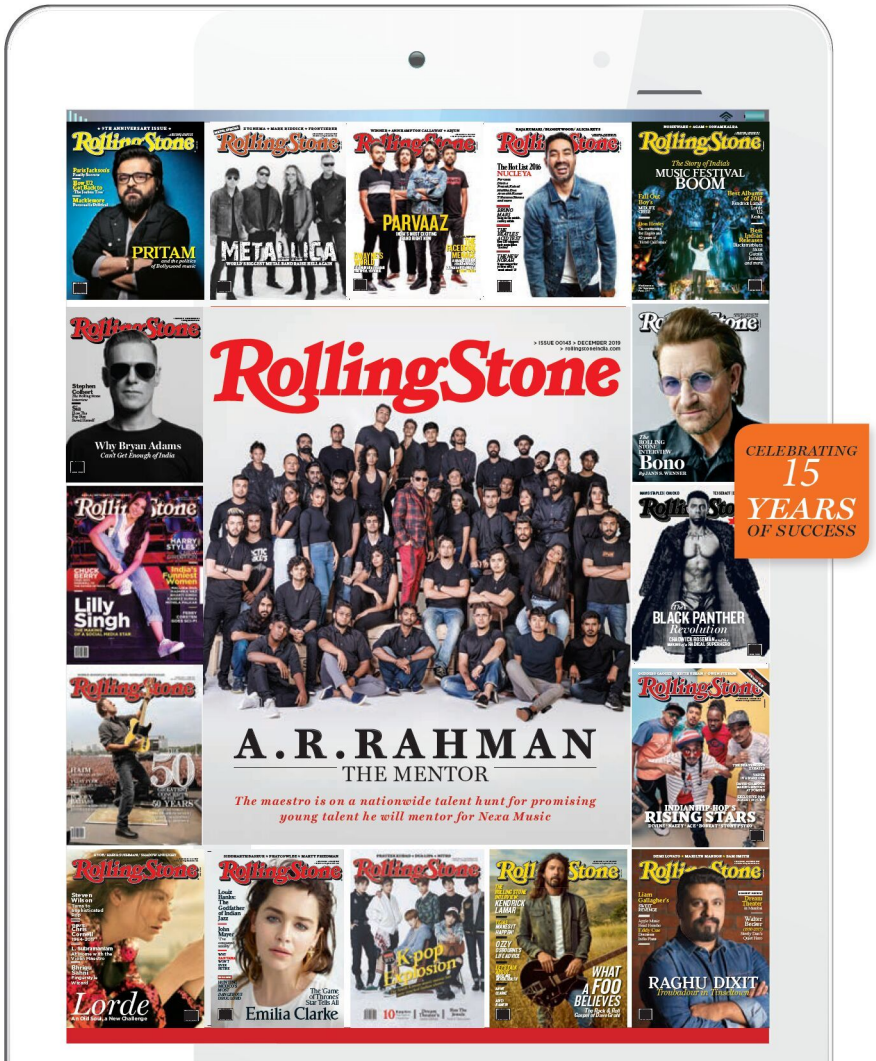

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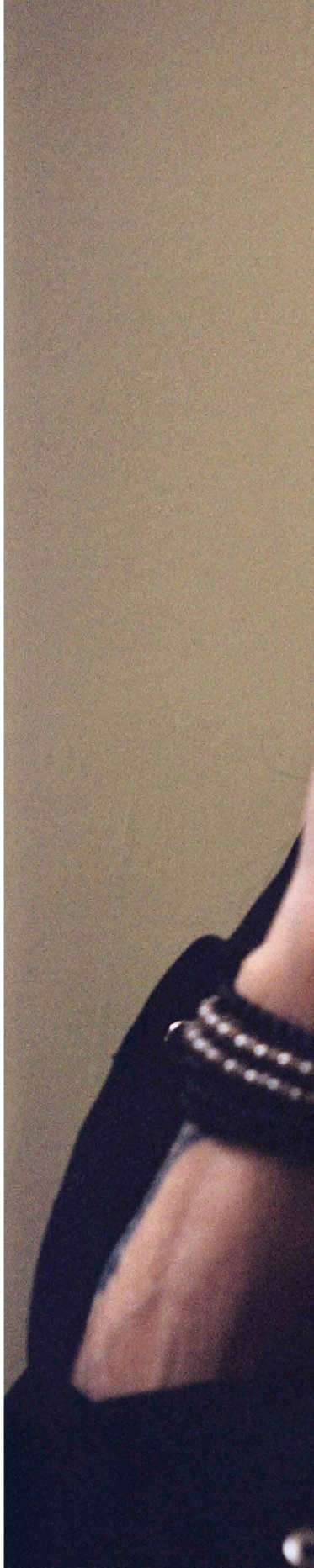
MICK MARS GOES TO WAR WITH MÖTLEY CRÜE

HE LEFT THE BAND HE CO-FOUNDED MORE THAN 40 YEARS AGO AMID A NASTY LEGAL FIGHT. NOW THE 72-YEAR-OLD IS READY TO TELL HIS STORY AND DISH THE REAL DIRT

BY ANDY GREENE

PHOTOGRAPHS BY QUYN DUONG



MICK MARS has spent a great deal of time thinking about his own death, which will happen, he estimates, in about eight years, tops. There won't be a funeral or memorial service of any kind. Instead, the Mötley Crüe guitarist wants the cremated remains of his body — which has been ravaged for nearly 60 years by the disfiguring bone disease ankylosing spondylitis — packed into a lead urn. "I want them to take it into an airplane and drop it into the center of the Bermuda Triangle," he says. "I want people to be able to say, 'Mick Mars is lost in the Bermuda Triangle.'"

It's a morbid conversation any time, but today happens to be Mars' 72nd birthday. He's seated on a couch in the living room of his Tennessee mansion, draped head to toe in black, with his thin black hair protruding from the back of a newsboy cap. His skin is so pale it looks almost translucent. About five feet away are 10 enormous Marshall speaker stacks and studio-quality microphones that he's been using to record his debut solo album. "I don't feel a day over 71," he jokes as I greet him.

His phone has been buzzing all day with birthday wishes from family and friends, but he hasn't heard a word from his three bandmates. Mötley Crüe are in the midst of a nasty legal battle following Mars' decision in October to retire from the road after spending last summer on a reunion tour alongside Poison, Def Leppard, and Joan Jett. Mars has alleged in court filings that the band used this as an excuse to remove him from the group he co-founded 42 years ago, denying him what he sees as his share of future band proceeds. In the legal proceedings, he's also accused his bandmates of miming to prerecorded tracks on the tour, and they've turned around and said Mars was the one faking it onstage, since, they say, he was unable to remember the songs or play them properly. The case has just started to work its way through the legal system, and emotions remain hot.

"When they wanted to get high and fuck everything up, I covered for them," Mars fumes. "Now they're trying to take my legacy away, my part of Mötley Crüe, my ownership of the name, the brand. How can you fire Mr. Heinz from Heinz ketchup? He owns it. Frank Sinatra's or Jimi Hendrix's legacy goes on forever, and their heirs continue to profit from it. They're trying to take that away from me. I'm not going to let them."

Speaking a few weeks before the start of Mötley Crüe's European tour with replacement guitarist John 5, bassist Nikki Sixx — who has largely stayed silent alongside the other members — vents months of pent-up frustration. "We're sitting there, coming back from retirement, and our guitar player can't remember songs," he says. "We were there watching him physically fall apart, mentally fall apart, his memory fell apart. We really were, with kid gloves, always trying to support Mick. We've always stood by his side. But we couldn't let his side of the stage just be a train wreck. And now he's only saying these things because he's trying to hurt us. What's the point? He's destroying his own legacy."

On the morning of his birthday, Mars is just trying to focus on the day's plans. His wife, Seraina, bought him a Roland System 8 synthesizer as a present ("It does lots of cool stuff!" Mars says, excitedly), and she's been up since 5 a.m. roasting a pork butt in the backyard's Big Green Egg barbecue. An ornate, enormous chocolate cake with white-pearl sprinkles — made from scratch — sits in the fridge. Their long-haired Maine coon cat, Ernie Ball, lounges on the couch while an ad for the TruTV show *Ghost Hunters* plays on the television. There are plastic skulls of all shapes and sizes stocked throughout the house, including a skull cup in the kitchen that holds packets of Equal and Sweet'N Low. Two long, wooden skulls hold up the subwoofer in their home theater.

This may sound weird and gothic, but it's actually a very warm and homey environment compared with Mars' past. Back in the Eighties, Mars spent his nights driving his Corvette around Los Angeles and getting plastered at Sunset Strip bars. But nowadays, he rarely leaves his home, preferring to curl up on a brown leather recliner with Seraina to watch horror movies in their screening room. "All the *Hostel* movies are good," he says. "But I prefer the older horror movies. Some of them are so bad they're good. The new ones are like polished, overproduced records."

It's a strange thing to hear coming from the guitarist who co-wrote "Girls, Girls, Girls" and "Don't Go Away Mad (Just Go Away)," not exactly minimalist, unpolished productions. But Mars was never a perfect fit for an Eighties glam-metal band. He's a decade older than his three bandmates, and had way more love for blues-rock bands like Ten Years After and Bad Company than the glittery groups like Kiss and the New York Dolls that the others worshiped. "There was a lot of really good stuff in the Seventies," Mars says. "I wish I could have [been successful] then. I would have been a better fit. But I missed that boat."

He wouldn't catch that boat until he was 29. Broke and desperate with three young kids to support, he met his Mötley Crüe bandmates through an ad billing himself as a "loud, rude, and aggressive guitar player." Within months, they were the hottest band on the scene thanks to an explosive stage show, tight leather outfits, and liberal usage of hairspray, mascara, and lipstick. "I went along with the makeup, but I never liked it," he says, sighing. "I looked like a really ugly old woman."

MICK MARS doesn't remember when the pain began, but he thinks he was about 14 or so. It started with sharp aches at the top of his tailbone. By the time he began gigging around L.A. in club bands a few years later, it started to spread throughout his body. "I remember telling a friend that my back was hurting so bad that it felt like I had a hole in my stomach and stomach acid was burning my insides," he says. "I grabbed a hold of a doorknob and said, 'Pull on me as hard as you can.' But my back wouldn't crack, and the pain kept getting worse. My whole body started to bend. It made me look older than I already was."

When he was 27, a doctor diagnosed him with ankylosing spondylitis. "I thought, 'Cool, I know how I'm going to die now,'" he says. "But it isn't AS that kills you. It causes something else to happen that kills you. It rarely goes into your hands or feet. That meant I could play guitar, and that's what mattered most."

For the man born Robert Alan Deal in Terre Haute, Indiana, playing the guitar "mattered most" ever since he was three years old and watched coun-

THIS PAGE: RANDY BACHMAN/GETTY IMAGES; OPPOSITE PAGE, FROM TOP: DAVE BENETT/GETTY IMAGES; KEVIN MAZUR/GETTY IMAGES FOR LIVE NATION

L.A. GLAM
Opposite page: Mars, Sixx, Neil, and Lee (from left) in the early days

NEW CRÜE
Left: Sixx, Corabi, Mars, and Lee (from left) in 1994

LAST TOUR
Below: Neil and Mars on tour in Atlanta last year

try singer Skeeter Bond play a 4-H Fair while standing on two picnic tables. "He was wearing a bright-orange outfit with rhinestones all over the place, and a big white Stetson hat," says Mars. "I went, 'I'm doing that. That's what I want to do.'"

When he was nine, his family of four squeezed into their 1959 Ford Galaxie and drove more than 2,000 miles to the working-class town of Garden Grove, California. Money was painfully tight, and would remain so for Mars until the Crüe took off in the Eighties. But his parents saved up enough to buy him a guitar, and he practiced relentlessly, thinking of little else beyond making it big. His life shifted, though, when his girlfriend Sharon gave birth to their son Les Paul when he was just 19. A daughter, Stormy, followed a couple of years later.

He spent his days operating heavy machinery in an industrial laundromat, and his nights playing tiny clubs with his band Wahtoshi. When a workplace accident nearly pulverized one of his hands and he quit to focus full time on music, Sharon walked out and took Les and Stormy with her. It began a difficult period for the broke, fledgling musician that involved playing in third-rate bands around L.A., crashing on couches and floors, and dodging cops demanding overdue child support.

In 1973, he joined the moderately successful cover band White Horse. "He had very good intonation," recalls White Horse bassist Harry Clay. "And a very good ear and timing. He could copy parts note for note. You give him [Deep Purple's] 'Highway Star,' and he could nail Ritchie Blackmore's riffs."

But even with a steady paycheck from White Horse, Mars still couldn't afford his own place and had to crash on the floor of an apartment Clay shared with White Horse drummer Jack Valentine. He conceived his third child, Erik, on that floor, making his financial situation even more perilous. "He was a real sad guy," says Valentine. "Looking into his eyes, I just saw this world of sorrow. He had such a hard life." (Mars is in touch with Les Paul today, but estranged from his two other kids. His wife of nearly 10 years has never even met them. Mars believes he has nine grandkids and at least one great-grandchild, but he's not sure of the exact number. It's not a topic he enjoys discussing.)

"He lived with me for four years and used all sorts of aliases to avoid the police," Valentine continues. "Any time we got pulled over by the cops for a taillight or whatever, and the cops saw his ID, they'd throw him in jail. We'd have to figure a way to get him out. I had to hock my cymbals once just to bail him out so we could play a gig."

Mars was worth all the trouble, since he helped White Horse develop a bigger following around Southern California. When Mars joined, their main competitor was Mammoth, another cover band, led by an unknown guitarist named Eddie Van Halen. "Mick Mars and Eddie Van Halen were the two hottest guitar players in L.A.," says Valentine. "There probably weren't two better guitar players on the planet."

But by the late Seventies, many rock clubs on their circuit switched over to disco, and White Horse ultimately pushed Mars out. "You couldn't play rock anymore," says Valentine. "Our producer said, 'If you guys don't drop this rock & roll crap and get with the disco scene, you're going to wind up playing beer dives the rest of your life, like Van Halen.'"

EVERYTHING WAS SUPPOSED to be different once Mars teamed up with Sixx and drummer Tommy Lee. He was finally in a band with outsize ambition, chops that matched his own, and a firm commitment to original music. Thinking back to an alternative name that White Horse dreamed up years earlier, he named them Mötley Crüe. (Sixx added the umlauts.)

Mars also found a financial backer to help them cut their first songs, and successfully lobbied for them to fire original singer O'dean Peterson after just a few weeks, feeling he wasn't quite the right fit. "I remember the first time I saw Vince Neil," says Mars. "He was maybe 19; this skinny blond kid all decked out in white leather. He looked cool as hell. I was like, 'I don't give a shit if that kid can sing or not. Look at the girls! Sex sells.'"

Looking back on his Crüe career, Mars says nothing matched the euphoria of that first year, when the band burst out of the club scene and recorded future classics like "Live Wire" and "Too Fast for Love." The music drew equally from punk, glam, and metal, creating a distinctive, hybrid sound. "That's when I was the happiest," he says. "It's like climbing up the old ladder instead of stagnating in a stinkin' club. You could feel it and see it. Everything was new. Everyone was like, 'I haven't heard stuff like this before.'"

Unlike many metal guitarists of the era, Mars was never showy and disdained shredders. "He had such a great tone," says John Corabi, who joined the Crüe as a vocalist in 1992 after Neil left the band, and remains close to Mars. "He was into guys with amazing tones like [Mountain's] Leslie West and Jeff Beck. To Mick, it was about kicking you in the chest and having this ungodly sound. He was a scientist when it came to sound. And he wasn't just 10 years older than his bandmates, he was 10 years wiser."

But once MTV embraced them and they started playing to tens of thousands of people a night, things got complicated. His three bandmates dove into the rock & roll lifestyle to absurd degrees, and deep divisions surfaced within the group. When they toured with Ozzy Osbourne in early 1984 — a famously debauched pairing where the Crüe watched the singer drunkenly snort a line of ants ("I saw it myself," Mars says) — Osbourne bassist Bob Daisley says he wandered onto the Crüe bus one night and saw them discussing a plot to fire Mars. "I said to them, 'You've got a chemistry there, Mick Mars is part of that. Don't fuck it up,'" Daisley recalled in 2021.

Mars believes the story, though he claims the band never threatened to outright fire him. "They didn't have the balls," he says. "But one day at rehearsal they went, '[Osbourne guitarist] Jake E. Lee would look good right here.' I went, 'I'm the guitar player in the band. Nobody else needs to be there.'" (Sixx says that both of those stories are "100 percent false.")

Around this same time, heroin entered their scene. "I went, 'Please don't ever, ever do smack,'" Mars says. "'You can't make music when you're falling down.' Well, too late. That really upset me." Mars admits, though, that he developed a major drinking problem in the Eighties. He had little interest in the groupie scene. "I was the old guy," he says. "So my groupies had canes.... But look, there's a time to party your ass off, and there's a time to stop. You have to go, 'You know what? I'm done.'"

But even at the peak of the band's success, Mars was rarely on firm financial footing. "Lumps of cash did come," he says. "But I was married twice and broke three times. One was before the band formed. Two was the first wife, and three was the second wife. They drained my bank accounts. I lost my house. I lost cars. I lost guitars. I lost everything."

It's arguably why he looks back at the *Dr. Feelgood* era with bitterness, even though it produced five hit singles and catapulted the band to superstardom. "We could have toured that for at least a year and a half," Mars says. "We did nine months and I was like, 'No! I'll just say that somebody was sick in the band.' When that tour was cut off, I was so disappointed."

Sixx sounds genuinely baffled by this take. "Nobody in the band got sick," he says. "We were all clean and sober, and we toured for a long time behind that record until it was probably time to stop touring. These are things that have never been said to us or management. Why would he not share these thoughts with [us] ever?"

According to Mars, if he never brought it up, it was due to his extreme aversion to conflict and absence of

any offstage relationship with the band. He says Sixx last visited his house during the *Dr. Feelgood* era. "He's only [ever] visited me two or three times at the most," Mars says. "Tommy came over once, and Vince just came over once, even though he lived around the corner from me in Venice Beach. It's just the way we worked."

"THIS IS A SONG I wrote called 'Killing Breed,'" Mars says. "It's about narcissists that keep you pinned down and make you feel crazy."

We're sitting in Mars' makeshift studio right off his living room. Priceless guitars sit in racks and cases all along the walls, including an orange 1960 Gibson Les Paul worth roughly $250,000, and his legendary white Fender Stratocaster, Isabella, that he played onstage at countless Crüe concerts. Much of the paint has peeled off, and it's coated in dark burn marks thanks to it perpetually being in close proximity to pyro.

The music from his upcoming album, *Another Side of Mars,* is darker and more aggressive than anything in the Crüe catalog. A quick glance at song titles on a whiteboard in his studio — "Broken on the Inside," "Alone," "Lonely in Your Grave," "Loyal to the Lie," "Decay," "Fear," "Memories," "Erased" — reveals his bitter frame of mind when penning the lyrics during the band's meltdown.

Mars refuses to explicitly say if the "narcissists keep you pinned down" quote is a reference to his Mötley Crüe bandmates, but he can't mask a sly smile. Still, it's hard to walk through his nearly 12,000-square-foot home and think he's anything but proud of his Crüe accomplishments. The walls are coated with gold records, vintage Eighties concert posters, and a framed copy of the Oct. 21, 1989, *Billboard* 200, where *Dr. Feelgood* sits at Number One.

It was the pinnacle of the band's success. Grunge hit a couple of years later, Neil quit, and the band tanked when it toured with Corabi to support a dead-on-arrival 1994 album. "We went from arenas to 1,200-seat clubs where you had to walk through the crowd to get to the stage," says Mars. "I thought we'd made the greatest record we'd ever done. And did I feel cheated? Yes, I did. If we'd done the *Dr. Feelgood* tour long enough, I wouldn't have felt cheated."

They reluctantly reunited with Neil in 1997 to record *Generation Swine,* and Mars says he was squeezed out of the decision-making process at this point. Corabi, who stuck around for the first few months of the reunion era, backs up Mars' claims. "They had no respect for Mick," he says. "Mick was just the grumpy old bastard to them. [Nikki and Tommy gave] Mick shit about his finances and the girls he dated. He'd been dealing with over 20 years of this."

Generation Swine comes up about 10 different times throughout my two days with Mars, mostly unprompted. It's a quarter-century in the past, but the trauma still feels fresh and raw. "I don't think there's one note that I played," he says, wincing. "They didn't want my guitar to sound like a guitar, basically. They wanted it to sound like a synthesizer. I felt so useless. I'd do a part, they'd erase it, and somebody else would come in and play."

When they went back into the studio to cut *New Tattoo* a couple of years later, with Randy Castillo on drums in place of Lee, Mars says he was denied a chance to participate. "I didn't write any of those songs, since I wasn't invited," Mars says. "I think I got one lick on that album." (Sixx disputes this: "Mick played lead guitar, rhythm guitar, and any other guitar that's on that record," he says. "And Mick is a guy who wrote some pretty cool riffs, but he's not a songwriter. And everyone forgets Mick's health during this time. This is during the period that he had disintegrated into opiate addiction.")

On 2008's *Saints of Los Angeles,* which is the most recent Mötley Crüe record to date, both sides agree that D.J. Ashba handled much of the guitar work, uncredited. Sixx says they had little choice. "Mick was struggling to play his parts," he says. "So there's [a] mixture of D.J. and Mick, and we would always make Mick the center focus unless, of course, he couldn't play his parts or remember his parts."

The low point came shortly after 9/11, when Mötley Crüe went on extended hiatus and Mars retreated deep into his Malibu home. He was drinking to excess, and the 45 Advil a day he was taking to numb the agony of AS would be replaced by Oxycontin, Vicodin, and eventually near-lethal doses of Lortab. On top of that, a deadly mold had spread throughout his home. Without any tour or recording commitments, Mars rarely ventured outside, and he claims the effects of the mold made him emaciated and delusional.

"I used to see giant reptile aliens at the end of my bed," he says. "And little hairy aliens. At night, cat people used to come in, the kind my mother used to warn me might come and steal my breath. Luckily, I figured out that I was hallucinating. Other people never do, and wind up jumping out of windows."

Shortly before the band's 2005 reunion tour, Mars moved out of the house and underwent hip-replacement surgery. "He moved into my house," Sixx says. "I took him to doctors, and I actually had to spoon-feed him since he was so fucked up."

A new, mold-free house and a lucrative tour brought Mars back from the dead, and he managed to have fun in Mötley Crüe for the first time in years. They called the tour Carnival of Sins, giving Mars an excuse to wear the kind of makeup he loves. "I got to slap on some clown makeup and have fun with it," he says. "I really felt free."

"I WAS SABOTAGED MUSICALLY SO THEY'D HAVE AN EXCUSE TO GET RID OF ME AND BRING IN ANOTHER PERSON," MARS SAYS.

IN 2007, when the Crüe went to Europe to play a handful of metal festivals, Mars met Seraina Schönenberger, a 23-year-old photographer-model-guitarist he chatted with on Myspace a few months earlier. Schönenberger responded to one of his status updates, which led to Mars writing to her directly, something along the lines of "Fuck weekends, they just lead to another week of dread." The two have been together since.

In 2013, the couple moved from Malibu to the Nashville suburbs in search of a quieter pace and more room. They've spent the past year adding a hot tub and a massive nine-and-a-half-foot-deep pool to their enormous backyard, and Schönenberger has overseen every step of the process. Today is chaotic, as a construction team waits to fill up a water tanker truck while Schönenberger seems to be in six places at once. She sprints up the stairs to field questions from the construction crew, comes running when a fuse blows in Mars' home studio to reset the breaker and all the equipment, continually tends to the pork butt on the grill, and effortlessly carries a chair double her size down a narrow flight of stairs. She affectionately refers to Mick as "Mars Man," and stops everything the moment she senses he needs anything.

Mars spent a lot of blissful time with Schönenberger after Crüe retired from the road in 2015 following a long "farewell tour." The band signed a supposed "cessation of touring agreement" contract, claiming it legally prohibited them from playing live again. But they refused to share the document with the press, and it seemed like little more than a cynical ploy to boost ticket sales. Mars swears he believes it was real, pointing to an interview he did in 2014 where he said he'd buy everyone free tickets if they ever toured again. "That's how confident I was we were done," he says. "I thought we had a real contract."

But like nearly every other act that embarks on a farewell tour, Mötley Crüe were full of shit. They returned to the road in 2022, claiming their 2019 Netflix movie, *The Dirt,* rejuvenated a groundswell of interest they couldn't ignore. "When the movie came out, I knew what was going to happen next," Mars says. "I resigned myself to the fact that I had to go on tour again, but I was pretty much done."

Seven years away from tour buses, airports, and hotels — not to mention his bandmates — was enough to convince Mars that he never wanted to return to the road. Prior to rehearsals, he told the band this was his last tour. "I said, 'You guys, I'm not retiring,'" Mars says. "'Do you want to do a Vegas residency or record new music? I'm there. You want to do a one-off? I'm there. I just can't do the world anymore.'"

His AS had progressed to the point where he was no longer able to move his head from side to side, and he's permanently hunched over. He's at least three inches shorter than he was in high school. "My spine is now one solid bone," he says. "It feels like there's a 40-pound cinder block tied to my forehead with string at all times, pulling it down."

He got through every show — he agreed to play only 12 shows, but it stretched to 36 — in a state of near-constant agony. (By this point, his spine had essentially been ground in the shape of a question mark.) But watching videos of himself in that diminished form was somehow even more painful. "I look like a skeleton," he says. "I hate seeing that on video. But I refuse to use a cane. I refuse to use a wheelchair. If I can't get up there myself, I'm not doing it. I don't like the way I look, and I feel very awkward seeing myself onstage like that."

THE PRESS RELEASE went out on Oct. 27, 2022. "While change is never easy, we accept Mick's decision to retire from the band due to the challenges with his health," Neil, Lee, and Sixx wrote in a statement. "We will carry out Mick's wish and continue to tour the world as planned in 2023." The absence of any Mars quote was suspicious, and fans learned the full story on April 6, 2023, when Mars filed a lawsuit against the band, alleging they had illegally ousted him from the group and cut

him out of future profits from all seven of their corporate entities. The 29-page filing is a stunning document, highlighting many of the worst moments in the band's history and painting Sixx, Lee, and Neil in the most negative light possible.

"Two of the members (not Mars) were addicted to heroin for much of their careers, and one has had a continuous, severe alcohol addiction," reads a typical passage. "Another band member (not Mars) was placed on probation repeatedly for a series of violent incidents, and was ultimately convicted of felony spousal abuse for repeatedly kicking his wife while she was holding their 7-week old baby."

"If Mick made these claims in an article or letter, he'd be opened up to liability in a lawsuit," says Crüe manager Allen Kovac. "But in California, anything in a legal pleading is protected from defamation laws. This just isn't a real case. It's a ploy for media attention. If it was a real case, he would've made the request in arbitration, and he would've gotten these documents anyway because we have nothing to hide."

The part of Mars' filing that generated the most attention involved Sixx's bass playing on the 2022 tour. "[Sixx] did not play a single note on bass during the entire U.S. tour," it states. "100 percent of Sixx's bass parts were nothing but recordings."

The group responded with sworn declarations from seven crew members claiming that Sixx did indeed play live bass, and that Mars often forgot the songs or simply played them incorrectly. Mars doesn't deny that he sometimes struggled onstage, but has a more nefarious explanation for it. "I was sabotaged musically so they'd have an excuse to get rid of me and bring in another person," he says. "The feed of guitar into my in-ear monitor was horrible. It would break up, and nobody else's seemed to break up but mine. And then they'd switch to prerecorded crap from rehearsals, when I was just relearning the songs. They did it to make me look bad."

"That's insanity," Sixx counters. "Why would we do that to our fans? It's really heartbreaking that Mick and his representatives are lying to the fans while we were trying to protect his legacy. Dude, we love the fuckin' guy. It's really scary, [him] being in this complete hallucination. When Mick came into rehearsals, he couldn't play guitar properly. He just couldn't pull it off, so we have to use tapes and cover it up. He was the only person in the band on tape."

The band describes Mars as senile and confused, but I saw very little evidence of this during our time together. There were brief struggles to remember a word or song title, but Mars was sharp, funny, and focused, telling stories from decades past in vivid detail. He moved up and down the many staircases in his home without assistance. He's certainly frail, and he rarely stood for more than a few minutes at a time, but he seems in complete control of his mental faculties.

Little of this matters, though, when it comes to the major legal question at hand, which comes down to whether or not the band members can unilaterally remove Mars from their LLCs and deny him money. They point to a 2008 band document all parties signed that states that "in no event shall any Resigning Shareholder be entitled to receive any monies attributable to live performances (i.e., tours)."

The Mars camp counters that he's not a "resigning shareholder," but merely a member who can't commit to touring. "If Jeff Bezos decides that he doesn't want to be an employee of Amazon anymore, he still has his shares," says Mars attorney Edward McPherson. "Nobody takes that away from him. I don't understand why these people can think that because Mick doesn't tour, he doesn't own his shares."

"There's a document that Mick signed," says Crüe attorney Sasha Frid. "If you're resigned from touring, you don't get to participate [in the profits]. You don't get to sit home in any corporation and collect a paycheck when you're not out there touring and making your contributions. It just doesn't make any sense."

While Mötley Crüe record new songs and tour Europe with John 5 on guitar, Mars is seeking out a record label to release *Another Side of Mars*, but don't expect to see him take it on the road. "I'm done touring," he says. "If somebody really, really wants a one-off, or a couple of nights, I would probably do it. But all that travel stuff and planes … I'm way over it."

LIFE ON MARS "If I can't get up onstage myself, I'm not doing it," Mars says.

Money is hardly an issue since the 2022 tour grossed $173.5 million, and Mars netted a quarter of the Crüe's cut. And midway through playing me selections from his solo album, an email arrived in his inbox that put a huge smile on his face. "I sold my publishing!" he excitedly says. "The deal was just finalized. Now I can relax and don't have to worry about anything, since, like I said, I'm probably just going to live another seven or eight years."

I wince and say there's no way he can know this, but he's adamant. "I'm old enough, man," he says. "I'm not going to live to be 85 or 90, I just have a feeling. I don't want to, either. My brain doesn't want this ugly-ass body that's all fucked up to keep going. I wish I could just take the information out of my brain, put it on a chip and into somebody else, or a robot. There's still a lot of stuff going on up there."

As I pull out of his driveway, a huge water tanker truck pulls up. It's there to fill up his pool for the first time. His wife was talking about a birthday swim that night. The image makes me smile, and I'm reminded of a last question to Mars: What advice he would give himself in 1981, just as the Crüe were forming?

"Be a little more aggressive," he says. "Stay out of neutral. Be a voice for yourself. I don't like conflict, but if I could go back, I'd be more involved."

I ask if he ever regretted joining the band in the first place. His whole body goes still, his eyes go blank, and I could almost see the band's entire history spinning through his head — four long decades of success, excess, overdoses, prison sentences, bankruptcies, and the bitter infighting that led to this current legal battle. Eleven seconds slowly tick by before he responds. "Not really," he says. "We were different when we came out of the Sunset Strip. The rough spots were rough spots, and hard to deal with, but I got to see the world and play with a group that was this successful. So I don't regret anything … besides *Generation Swine*." ®

QUYN DUONG

LØREN IS NOT ALONE

The South Korean prodigy found comfort in alt-rock's universal depths; now he's sharing space with his heroes

By Riddhi Chakraborty

Photographer: Junkyung Lee
Visual Director/Stylist: Seajun Kim
Hair Stylist: Seonyeong Lee
Make-up Artists: Sunghee An, Young Lee

It's 1:30 AM in South Korea when Løren appears on my Zoom screen. He's dressed in a black sweatshirt with his dark hair loose, no makeup, and his smile is radiant. Tucked in his studio with keyboards and a sound booth behind him,

he assures me the ungodly hour isn't an issue. "This is like midday for us," he explains with a laugh, spinning a sleek little vape between his fingers. "Our company operates very late, so this is perfect timing." Overall, it's a softer image than I was expecting. His Instagram and music videos paint a more intimidating picture as he blazes across our feeds – impossibly tall and cigarette in hand, draped in tattoos and oozing confidence – it's exactly the kind of glamorous image that pop culture connects to the traditional 'rockstar.' But behind the scenes, he's happy to relax and let that larger-than-life version of himself recede so that the shy emo inside can take over.

Løren is towards the end of what he calls the 'longest day' but in truth, it's been a whirlwind of action for the 28-year-old a lot longer than that. Along with the release of his debut EP *Put Up A Fight* in March and signing with Asian-American music giant 88rising for its distribution, 2023 has been packed full of performances at some of the world's biggest music festivals including SXSW, Head in The Clouds and Coachella. In fact, getting a hold of him for this interview involved a few months' coordination between our teams before we realized that waiting for him to return to his home base in Seoul for a breather between trips seemed like the best bet. "I just recently flew back. I did a show in Taiwan. It was fun," he says cheerfully. He's set to fly out to Berlin two days after our conversation for a Saint Laurent show and has several more performances planned over the next few months. "It's like straight back to rehearsals after this, because we have a couple of other events coming up in like July, August-ish."

All of this demand is well-deserved; while Løren 'officially' made his debut as a rock act in 2020 with the rebellious single "Empty Trash," he's been in the industry a lot longer, contributing to a few of K-pop's biggest hits along the way. Going under the pseudonym Cawlr, he first made waves as a co-producer on Big Bang member and pop megastar G-Dragon's 2017 single "Bullshit," a grimy, aggressive hip-hop number from the veteran artist's critically acclaimed solo EP *Kwon Ji Yong*. In fact, it's the track that introduced me to his work. "I really appreciate that," he says when I tell him I've been keeping an eye on him since then. The mention of "Bullshit" has caught him off-guard and he grins in disbelief, taking a moment to gather his thoughts before adding, "Wow, I haven't even thought of that song in a very long time... But that was like my first proper 'Okay, my music has seen the light of the world' moment, so it means a lot to me. I still remember the day when it came out, and it was pretty magical."

AS WE BEGIN talking about his life, I see a part of myself in Løren. Before he became the enigmatic rising star of rock that he is today, he was Lee Seungjoo, a kid who moved from South Korea to Singapore to start a new life thanks to his parents' job transfers. He joined the Singapore American School, spoke very little English at the time, and kept mostly to himself. It's a familiar story to those of us who are fellow international school alumni; it was a life of drifting from one city to another every few years, switching languages and cultures before we could fully process any of it. This particular background brings with it a hesitation to put down permanent roots and it meant we were automatically designated to be the loners, the kids who didn't quite fit into any long-term groups. Therefore, most of us found salvation in the one thing that remained constant: music.

Rock, in particular, spoke to a lot of us because it balanced anger with resolution and isolation with the underlying message that 'we're all in this pain together,' so it makes sense that it stood out to Løren as well. "I was fascinated by rock music from the get-go, ever since I saw it on TV... I think it was even before that," he shares. "I just really liked the energy that it had and so, naturally, as soon as I could, I bought a guitar. A shitty $100 guitar set, and I formed a band with a couple of kids. I also played percussion in the school's concert band. I gradually became a drummer as well. So... a lot of performances, a lot of flops throughout high school and failed song attempts."

For Løren, making music in those days often came with the dream that putting out a hit song or delivering one outstanding gig could pull him from the hell that was high school. "I had a pretty rough time throughout school just in general," he admits. "I can name maybe one person that I could call my friend. But even then, you know, it's not mutual... he's my friend, but it's not like I'm like his best friend or something. My interaction with other people was very minor. A lot of that kind of translated into me becoming this ball of solitude, where I just played like drums all the time in my room. I would dream about, 'Okay, maybe if I do this one gig really well, maybe the kids will like me,' you know? Like some sort of high school teen movie shit — which never happened — but I guess a lot of that feeling was portrayed through the music. It began with a lot of emo pop-punk, like 'I'm very angry at the world and fuck you guys.'" I tell him it's the most relatable fucking thing I've heard in my life, and he bursts out laughing. "I'm glad you stuck around," he says. "It's like when you tell your parents, 'It's not a phase!', now we get to tell them, 'I told you, so. Now it's my job!' We spend the next couple of minutes bonding over our

“I don't need them to like my music... You can shit on my music, you can shit on me as a person, but you can't take away the fact that I poured myself into this.”

mutual love for Megadeth, being the emo kids of our respective schools, and being shunned for our unorthodox tastes in music. He shakes his head as he remembers, “There was a point where I was listening to [American death metal band] Dying Fetus and some kids saw my iPod. They were like, ‘What the fuck are you listening to?’ and I couldn’t even defend myself – I was like, ‘I know they’re called Dying Fetus but I swear they’re pretty good!’”

As time passed and he dove deeper into the subgenres of rock, things shifted; it was no longer about what the world thought of him and fighting to feel accepted – it was about finding himself in all these different branches of music. Løren fell in love with math/prog band Animals As Leaders and even more obscure acts like Giraffes? Giraffes!, to more mainstream names like The White Stripes and The Killers. “I had 15,000 songs on my laptop but the one thing that really stuck with me was the whole post-punk revival movement in the early 2000s,” he says. “I felt like that had the perfect balance between musicality and approachability. Lyrically, I felt like the vagueness that comes with the genre was very appealing.” He spent the next few years listening to Jack White, Damon Albarn (Blur, Gorillaz) and The Strokes. “Julian Casablancas is probably one of my favorite artists of all time. I think that’s when I was like, ‘Alright, I’m probably gonna settle here,’ because I still listen to The Strokes pretty much every day and it’s been like 13 years.”

GRADUATING FROM HIGH school in 2013 meant the end of Løren’s time with his band. “Singapore is a very temporary place,” he says. “A lot of people are there because of their parents’ jobs and then they just kind of go back. It doesn’t last more than a couple of years, usually.” He began to chase music on his own, stepping away from rock to pursue paths which might lead him into production or songwriting. It wasn’t his first love but it was, at the end of the day, a step into the music industry. “I figured that’s the one thing I could do by myself.”

After returning to Seoul, he began performing at nightclubs under the moniker DJ Boid, experimenting with EDM and hip-hop. Those skills eventually led him to working with G-Dragon on “Bullshit” and captured his current company The Black Label’s attention. Co-founded by one of South Korea’s most prominent producers Teddy Park, The Black Label houses some of the country’s leading producers and soloists. A few names include Zion.T, Big Bang’s Taeyang, pop singer Jeon Somi, producers Kush, R.Tee, 24 and more. The Black Label officially signed Løren on in 2017 and served as the support system he needed to finally push himself in the direction he was meant to go. “As I picked up how to make music through a computer with a sequencer, I learned that the magic of modern music production is that you can actually make a full-on rock band by

LONER

"I had 15,000 songs on my laptop but the one thing that really stuck with me was the whole post-punk revival movement in the early 2000s. I felt like that had the perfect balance between musicality and approachability."

yourself. That was not something that I thought was doable. I thought I needed like five people, but I didn't." Løren credits Park in particular for encouraging him to keep working on rock. "Teddy, who was the head of our company, he actually very much supported my vision of becoming a soloist from the get-go, which gave me all the confidence because I'm a very insecure person. I don't think I would have had the courage to chase this properly had it not been for his advice. Eventually, my dream to become a rock [artist] kind of reignited."

Over the next couple of years, he made an impression on mainstream audiences as a key songwriter on Blackpink's 2020 debut LP *The Album*, having co-written "Pretty Savage," "You Never Know" and the record's rock-tinted lead single, "Lovesick Girls" with the group. He even ended up going viral across stan Twitter for his appearance in the "Lovesick Girls" music video, which he finds baffling. "Being in 'Lovesick Girls' was a very last-minute thing," he laughs, adding that it was Blackpink's idea to have him cameo. "It was just kind of off the top of their heads and it was so much fun. You know, it's crazy. I didn't expect that many people to take interest." Although he kept his face somewhat hidden over the duration of the video, being associated with superstars like Blackpink automatically meant being thrust into the spotlight. There was an online frenzy at the time among mainstream K-pop audiences to learn more about him, and it meant that his debut a few months later would have a lot more eyeballs than he expected. "So the thing is, 'Empty Trash' was written a good two years before its release," he explains. "The video was actually shot in April, which was a lot earlier than 'Lovesick Girls' (October.) So yeah, it wasn't a planned thing for that [audience reaction] to happen." Like everything else that blows up on the internet, there were a few unsavory takes here and there, but Løren now sees it all in a positive light. "Even if some people felt that I got some sort of undeserved attention... Thank you. I'm grateful for every person that listens to my music. Even if it's hate, I'm still grateful. I'm glad it happened and I believe that everything happens for a reason. Whatever it may be, whatever you feel towards me, thank you for taking an interest in me."

IT'S WORTH NOTING that Løren's debut with "Empty Trash" in 2020 turned out to be a massive success because it stood out in Korea's pop-saturated industry. There weren't any other Korean artists stepping into darker strands of alt-rock at the time and the music video racked up several million views within weeks of its release (standing at over six million as of this writing.) Critics across the globe commended his commitment to the art; he did all the writing, production and arrangement on the track and played every instrument you hear on it. Its angsty 2021 follow-up "Need (ooo-eee)" was even better – reminiscent of Blink-182, Sum 41 and Green Day, it helped Løren gain a foothold in global the punk-pop renaissance of the 2020s, joining the likes of Willow Smith, Yungblud, Måneskin and more. Later that same year, he dropped "All My Friends Are Turning Blue," pushing the pop-punk sound further, solidifying his style as an artist, and finally– after years of having to fight the battle to keep rock alive on his own– having a band join him for the ride.

Forming a band with real friends was the ultimate goal Løren used to daydream about back in those harrowing days of high school. So even after it's been accomplished and they're touring the globe together, he won't let himself take any of it for granted. "I think there's a certain amount [of stress while performing live with a band] because I still write, produce and do everything with my music," he says after a few minutes' contemplation. "I'm the person who actually sees the entire blueprint and I'm the only person who can actually say, 'Okay, this frequency of the song, the low end is not pulling through' or whatever pocket is not working, or the tone is not right. So [I put] a lot of pressure on myself. As much as I prepare myself, I have to make sure that these guys are doing well, – I call them my kids – they're still very much nervous about performing, more so than myself, and to make sure that their mentality is on point..." He needs to put on a brave face no matter what happens? He nods, taking a puff of his vape before continuing, "Even if I am kind of shitting myself, I try to give off this energy like fuck it, you know? It's okay, let's just go and have fun, not worry about fucking up. If you do, you do. That just means you've got to go home and practice more, it's not the end of the world." He confesses the constant pressure of having to lead a band can be overwhelming, but he welcomes it because it keeps him sharp and grateful as a performer. "I'm happy to share that experience with the people that I genuinely love, who never even thought about doing music."

WHEN IT COMES to his songwriting, Løren is a beacon of self-awareness. As powerful as his debut EP *Put Up A Fight* is, it plays out like a string of various dark thoughts pieced together and he admits the process of making it wasn't about focusing on a particular theme. Rather, it outlines certain moments of his life from the last couple of years. "It was never planned as an EP," he reveals. "I was just writing songs left and right. At the time I didn't know if I would even perform – there was Covid and all these other things. So I think it's basically a compilation of the five songs that I think are okay out of the 50 that I wrote in the last three, four years." If there is anything tying the five tracks together, it is perhaps common threads of perception and judgment that run through them; the lead single "Folks" was written two years ago at a time when he felt he wasn't being taken seriously as an artist. The lyrics seesaw between helplessness and anger as he sings, "So blast your radio/ And bury me so I can grow/ 'Cause I won't leave alive/ My lies are getting old/ These fucks they'll never know/ If only I could show/ But I got no control/ I'll never know." The B-side "Panic" dives deeper into the fear of not being heard, while "Sticks And Stones" calls out fake friendships or perhaps even betrayal: "And I'll do anything/ Just not what I'm told/ Still can't help myself/ But I'm getting old/ In this sea of smiles/ Not a hand to hold/ Just my sticks and stones."

"I guess I felt that sometimes people are very quick to judge other people," he says about the emotions within *Put Up A Fight*. "I don't need them to like my music. But I don't want to take away from the fact that I put in a lot of effort, and I put in a lot of work and love and soul into what I do. I don't take this lightly in any sort of sense, and that I can't take away from myself. That's the line that I draw. You can shit on my music, you can shit on me as a person, but you can't take away the fact that I poured myself into this. It's a fact. It's like saying, I'm wearing black right now," he gestures at his shirt, "You can't take that away from me. But I felt like a lot of people in the beginning felt that I was maybe not sincere about music, or maybe that I didn't... I don't know." He pauses for a moment, unsure of how to express what he felt at the time and tucks a strand of his hair behind his ear, sinking into himself. "It was just people's perception that really got to me." He admits he isn't perfect either and it's natural to judge what you don't understand, but that's where his brilliant self-awareness comes into play– *Put Up A Fight* is also a critique about his own shortcomings. "Folks" in particular addresses this. "Being a human

> “I want to just become a musician without regrets and give back to the culture that I consumed. I think the culture in itself deserves at least a good effort to kind of return the favor, in a way.”

myself, I can't help but sometimes judge other people as well. I'm regretful of the fact that we are so quick to do this. But at the same time, I do realize and acknowledge that it's inevitable; as human beings, we're judgmental creatures. So it was that odd phase of my life where I did the same thing, but I hated myself for doing it."

He pairs all five tracks with branches of grunge, post-punk and alternative, conveying the same sense of vague relatability and approachability he fell in love with when he was younger and bringing in listeners who feel similarly. While the record earned critical acclaim as soon as it dropped and marked his first release under 88rising, Løren felt there was still something missing. "Sometimes it feels like... because it's not so in tune with what I make nowadays, it does kind of feel like it is something of the past," he says. "But I do feel like the amount of energy and effort that I put into those songs deserve some light."

Right now, his focus is on his next album and he's eager to keep moving. He doesn't want to give too much away yet, but he does offer to give me a slight outline of what he's building. "The album which I'm working on right now, all the songs were written within, like the last year or within the last couple of months," he says, sitting up straight again, excited to dive into it. "So it feels a lot more personal. It has a lot to do with the latter half of last year, which was pretty much when I was depressed out of my mind." He goes on to explain that the tail-end of 2022 was a low point in his career because he didn't have much going on at the time; the distribution deal with 88rising wasn't locked in yet and he was brimming with anxiety and anger. "I didn't know if I could kind of continue to do this in my tiny room and pretend like this is gonna go anywhere. So it was a lot of struggle for the first half of the album." As 2023 dawned and things began looking up, it was like a switch had flipped in his creative process, shaping a more positive outlook on the second half of the record. "After this ball started kind of rolling, I did a lot of work in L.A. with a bunch of super talented producers and songwriters, which was the first time that I actually worked with other people. And that was a new phase for me– it opened up such a big door of opportunities and possibilities. It sounds different, it feels different." He plans to fly back to L.A. as soon as possible to wrap up the record and figure out a release date. "So [the mood of the album is] very mixed between the early half and the second half of the past year, but I think there's a sort of beauty in the contrasting aspects. It has a lot more songs, too. I have like a good 10 or 12."

WHILE LONELINESS FUELED his creativity when he was younger – his stage name 'Løren' was, after all, born of an anagram for 'loner'– it is no longer the absolute truth of his life. He's built a world around himself that features a support system which spans his team at The Black Label, 88rising, his band, his friends in the industry and most importantly, his fans. To his listeners in particular, he's a symbol of something greater than himself – he's the ultimate success story, fighting through the murky depths of rejection and isolation to finally swim to shore and become the emo kid who made it. It's pretty badass and he's possibly one of the very few artists rising from our generation who embodies the rockstar image in a traditional sense.

Bringing this up with him, however, promptly leads him to cover his face. "I'm like, red right now, because the word 'rockstar' is... a pretty big pill to swallow," he says when he finally looks up again and his ears are indeed red. "But I really appreciate that. It's not that I feel like the way I portray myself is the 'rockstar type'... I just hope that people can see I've been doing this for over 10 years, and I've been loving this for maybe, like 15 years. So I hope that genuine affection shows through my music and me as a person. This is not a concept I'm trying to do; this is in my veins and in my blood."

While the charismatic artist we see onscreen isn't a facade he's putting on, Løren admits it takes a lot of work to get there emotionally. "I guess I have to portray or emit a certain amount of confidence, maybe more so than I, you know, genuinely usually feel," he says. "I'm a pretty insecure person. You know how people say that a lot of your psychological aspects developed when you're young? It's kind of hard to get rid of that. I think it's something that sticks with you almost permanently. But I've learned to kind of make peace with the fact that okay, this is not going away anytime soon. But at the same time, I think that whatever I hold in, really kind of erupts when I get the opportunity to show it." He knows a few people who are very different from their celebrity or artist personas onstage, but he feels he's showing us exactly who he is– he's still that emo kid who wanted to make music, he's just leveled up a bit. "I'm very bad at pretending, and I'm an awful actor," he grins. "So yeah, in videos, I try to look a lot prettier than I actually am, but apart from that, I like to think that I'm a genuine, transparent person, on and off stage."

Regardless of whether he's truly 'made it' or not, the most important goal in Løren's life right now is being able to give fans the same sense of hope he found through the artists he loved. It's something that's already happening, but he can't yet grasp the magnitude of it. "I think the reception that I got at Head In The Clouds was pretty wild," he says. "I did not expect that many people to show up, let alone like, cheer. You know, I was expecting a very low key 'who the fuck is this guy' type thing, and I could hear some people singing along, I saw some posters." It's surreal to finally connect with the community he's been a part of since he was a teenager, and even more so now because he's seeing the movement from the other side – the artist's side. "When I went to the So Wonderful Festival (in Taiwan) there was one person who had my logo drawn on their hand and I could see the entire time through videos that their hand was just up," he smiles. "I don't know who that person is, I don't know what they do. But I actually have to message that person because I genuinely want to thank them. Thank you. I feel sometimes that I am worthless, and what I do is not good enough ever. But the fact that somebody enjoys what I do that much is humbling."

For Løren personally, there probably won't ever be a point where he's 'made it' because he doesn't think he'll ever stop trying to be to others what his favorite artists were to him. He wants to continue to grow, improve himself to be worthy of his audience, and earn his place within the genre and culture that saved him. "I know the bar is going to continue to rise within me and I cross my fingers that I don't come to a point where I'm satisfied," he says firmly. "I want to try and make sure that I'm still looking at the next staircase instead of where I am today. I want to just become a musician without regrets and give back to the culture that I consumed. I think the culture in itself deserves at least a good effort to kind of return the favor, in a way."

THE GREATEST COMEBACK

AT THE START OF THE EIGHTIES, TINA TURNER WAS BROKE, ON THE RUN FROM IKE, AND PLAYING CHEESY CONVENTIONS. THE INSIDE STORY OF HER MIRACULOUS SECOND ACT

BY DAVID BROWNE

THAT ALMOST WASN'T

PHOTO BY AARON RAPOPORT/CORBIS/GETTY IMAGES

TINA TURNER
poses at home for a portrait in December 1984 in Los Angeles, California.

One day in London's Kensington district in 1983, Tina Turner's resurrection finally appeared within reach. The prior decade had been one of stage-shaking triumphs, personal nightmares, various degrees of mortification, and now, a chance at possible redemption. But as musician and producer Martyn Ware soon learned, Turner's past was never in the rearview mirror — and on that day, it was terrifyingly in her face.

The previous year, Turner had sung on an edgy, pulsating remake of the Temptations hit "Ball of Confusion," and now Ware — who had co-helmed that track, had co-founded the Human League, and was a member of Heaven 17 — was meeting with her to map out another collaboration. Arriving at what he recalls as "a beautiful kind of mansion" where Turner was staying, Ware took note of security guards outside. To his shock, Ware says, he was told that Turner's ex-husband, Ike, who had previously served 30 days for drug possession and wasn't averse to shooting at the newspaper-delivery guy or making threats on his wife's life, was in the city and calling; he was apparently trying to scale the walls of the building to demand money from Tina. "It was still going on then," Ware says. "And I thought, 'Tina is having to deal with this on a continuous basis.' She did everything with such grace, poise, and good humor. She must have been hurting underneath it all."

Ultimately, Turner and Ware decided to make over Al Green's "Let's Stay Together." The track would be the next step on the road to *Private Dancer*, the 1984 album that would reestablish Turner as a musical force and a public symbol for overcoming crushing personal adversity. "I think people actually go and see her not for the songs necessarily — they go to see her for what she represents," her friend David Bowie would later say. "The baggage of her past travels with her, and they're going to see somebody who like a phoenix from the ashes has risen.... She's certainly been through far worse than many of us have been through."

Given how much she was embraced by old admirers, the MTV generation, and the industry — the holy-grail triumvirate in the music business at the time — Turner's comeback should have been a cakewalk. Once the public learned what she'd endured with Ike, by way of a *People* interview in 1981, there were few pop stars more beloved. But the jarring reemergence of her ex-husband on an otherwise productive day in England would be far from the only hurdle in one of pop's most unexpected returns. Even then, with the world cheering her on, Turner's second act was never a given. At any moment, it could have been derailed by ageism, skeptics who wondered if she could make it on her own, music never released in her home country, and at least one racist music executive. Triggered in part by memories of life with Ike, she almost tripped herself up by not wanting to revisit the music that had made her a star to begin with. Only a series of happy accidents, combined with her unbridled belief in herself, would save her.

By the start of the Eighties, it was hard to imagine an even remotely bright future for Tina Turner. For many years, she'd been a star, fronting a band with Ike that raced like a locomotive through the pop landscape. Ann Bullock had wanted to be a nurse, but after meeting Ike and his band, the Kings of Rhythm, at a nightclub in St. Louis, Bullock was reborn, eventually renamed by her soon-to-be-husband as Tina Turner.

The two had a handful of R&B hits before crossing over to the rock world, thanks in part to opening for the Rolling Stones and remaking rock hits like "Proud Mary" and "Honky Tonk Women" in their own brassy, soul-revival style. Ike may have been the guitarist, boss, and bandleader, but all eyes were on his wife, who had the throaty, sensual delivery of a great gospel or blues singer and uninhibited dance moves unlike almost anything seen in pop. Her version of Otis Redding's "I've Been Loving You Too Long," which found her stroking her microphone, was undeniably erotic, and Turner herself was arguably the first major Black female rock star.

At the time, few knew the horrors of her life offstage and in studios with her abusive and womanizing husband. "Ike was beating me with phones, with shoes, with the hangers," she relayed in her first memoir, *I, Tina*. "Choking me, punching me — it wasn't just slapping anymore." Right before one show, he punched her so hard that he broke her jaw, and she had to still go onstage and sing. In 1976, at age 36, she left him and found herself raising four children while drowning in an ocean of debt. To earn a living, she took any work she could: on cheesy TV variety shows and in Vegas, where she resorted to covers of dance hits like "Disco Inferno"; during one dinnertime show, she accidentally dropped her mic into a customer's steak. "Suddenly the booking agents didn't think I had the ability to work without Ike," she said. "It was like starting over again."

Turner's relaunch began just as the Eighties began — and in the first of many such examples, it almost failed. R&B and disco were out, New Wave was in, and Turner again was musically adrift. Roger Davies, a young Australian manager, decided to see one of her regular gigs: two shows a night at the Venetian Room at the Fairmont Hotel in San Francisco in 1980. At

TURNER PERFORMS WITH HER BAND AT THE RITZ, NEW YORK IN 1981.

PHOTO BY GARY GERSHOFF/GETTY IMAGES

MICK JAGGER, Tina Turner and David Bowie at the Prince's Trust 10th Anniversary Rock Gala at Wembley Arena, London in 1986.

PHOTO BY DAVE HOGAN/GETTY IMAGES

first, Davies was underwhelmed by the garishness of her show, which included Turner in gaudy Bob Mackie dresses, four backup dancers, and covers of standards like "Fever." Reviewing her opening night, the *Oakland Tribune* wrote that Turner's show was "geared to the visiting conventioneer crowd."

But luckily for Turner, Davies stayed for the wilder second set. "People were standing on tables," he recalled in *I, Tina*. "The chandeliers were shaking." Before long, and with Turner's consent, Davies fired two of her dancers and hired new musicians. "She wanted to rock," says drummer Jack Bruno, one of the new recruits. "There were other tunes she would bring and put her touch on, which usually meant faster tempos. That was her signature thing, how she made songs her own." To save money, the new musicians were outfitted in matching black karate suits (instead of the more costly tuxedos of the previous lineup). "Ike was the musician, the bandleader, the director, the business manager," Turner said in 1981. "Now, that falls on me. That part is hard. I must make decisions I didn't have to make before."

As she told Rolling Stone at the time, "I want to get back into the rock of it!" Turner was still without a record deal and longed to be on par with the biggest bands of the time. "She wanted to be up there with the Stones and be mainstream and have hits of her own," says Ann Behringer, one of her backup dancers and singers during this period — and with Davies' help, that goal began taking shape. Rod Stewart invited her to join him on *Saturday Night Live,* and Turner opened for the Stones in New Jersey.

During those early days of her rebirth, Turner still packed her set with Ike-era singles like "Proud Mary" and "River Deep, Mountain High." But she often opened with a new addition to her repertoire — her own version of Stewart's sleazy deep cut "Foolish Behavior," renamed "Kill His Wife." The lyrics alone were startling: "Why I wanna kill my wife?/I have this urge to take her life/Been planning for years to get rid of her/Not divorce, I really do mean to kill her." During the instrumental break, Turner took the intensity one step further by grabbing a shocking prop — a noose, which she twirled around like a lasso.

Bruno felt that Turner was going for something stagey. "I'm not sure about her thought process, but she liked the theatrics of it," he says. "The audience was politely applauding, but they didn't know what to think." Again, few knew what Turner was coping with after she left Ike — death threats that made her fear for her life so much that she briefly carried a .38 and hired bodyguards. During one of her sets at the Fairmont, Ike arrived with an entourage. "She got super anxious," Behringer says, "but was a professional and acted like everything was fine." Turner never commented on the noose, and it didn't remain in her show long. But its disquieting imagery aside, that rage and defiance was the first hint of the way Turner would become a heroine to women who'd suffered from domestic violence and were looking for a way to survive and reset their lives.

Starting with Davies sticking around for her Fairmont show, the happy-accident aspect of Turner's return continued with James Brown. In 1982, British Electric Foundation — a partnership between Ware and Ian Craig Marsh — was working on a collection of synthed-up covers of songs from the Sixties and Seventies. The duo had enlisted Brown to front their remake of "Ball of Confusion." But at the last minute, negotiations with Brown fell through, they say, and suddenly the producers were left with a backing track and no singer.

To Turner's good fortune, the career-salvaging coincidences continued. In the offices of Virgin Records in London, Ware was bemoaning the fate of his project when Ken Berry, one of the founders of the label, walked by and overheard his predicament. Berry mentioned his friend Tina Turner: Maybe she'd be available? Ware had just seen her play in London and was reminded of the power of her voice and persona.

"I WAS BLOWN AWAY BY HER TALENT. I THOUGHT, 'IF ANYBODY COULD DO IT, TINA COULD.'"

TINA TURNER performs at the Poplar Creek Music Theater in Hoffman Estates, Illinois in 1987.

"I was blown away by her talent and energy," he recalls. "And I thought, 'Well, if anybody can do it, Tina could.'"

When Ware offered Turner and Davies plane tickets to London, they accepted — but the first phase of her comeback almost fell through. When she learned that the song in question was "Ball of Confusion," she "freaked out," Davies later recalled in *I, Tina*. "She was so afraid of being put back into any kind of category like 'oldies' or 'R&B.'" (In Ware's memory, Turner had rehearsed the song before, but may have been unnerved by the fact that the "band" amounted to a bank of synthesizers.) Eventually, Turner went along with the idea, cutting the vocal in one day. Whether the song and era evoked memories of Ike was unclear, but she seemed ready to move on. "That was quite tricky, to sing that song — it sounds like there's more than one voice on it," Turner said afterward to Ware. "And I'm saying, 'It's the Temptations, Tina,'" he recalls. "She said, 'Who are they?' My theory is that she turned her back on soul music. It's partly [Ike] and partly that she felt more connection with the world of rock & roll."

In another setback, "Ball of Confusion" was only released in Europe. But the song's ominous, herky-jerky throb was a universe removed from the soul grooves she had thrown down with Ike. In that way, it was a success, announcing to the world that a new Tina Turner had arrived. In its wake, Capitol Records expressed interest in her, and she and John Carter, an A&R man who'd become a Turner champion, began laying down tracks.

A Turner revival now seemed possible — until, again, it almost wasn't. In 1983, Capitol replaced its team with new management, who began questioning some of the projects in the works. In an infamous comment made to Carter, first reported on PopMatters in 2009, an unnamed executive informed Davies that he was dropping Turner from the label's roster, slurring her as an "old n----r douchebag." (After audio of that comment was included in the 2021 documentary *Tina,* Capitol issued a statement saying the company was "under different ownership and management, and we're only now learning of those reprehensible and appalling comments.") Dropping to his knees in a meeting, Carter (as he told PopMatters) informed the boss that he wouldn't leave the room until he called Davies to say he'd made "a mistake." Eventually, the executive begrudgingly agreed to reverse his decision, while adding that the company would barely lift a finger to promote an album. Her new music would be dead on arrival.

To modernize her sound and image, Turner had dragged her repertoire into the Eighties, too, incorporating Don Henley's "Dirty Laundry" and Bowie's "Cat People (Putting Out Fire)" into her set. The Bowie association would lead to another pivotal, if accidental, moment in her life. In January 1983, Bowie was in New York to sign with EMI, and was asked what he was planning to do that evening. To the surprise of the staff, he announced he was going to see his favorite singer: Turner. Thanks to that endorsement, Davies unexpectedly received a request for more than 60 free tickets to the show, all for employees of the label. "I became infinitely more interesting to them after I got David's seal of

PHOTO BY PAUL NATKIN/GETTY IMAGES

approval," Turner said. "I didn't know any of this until later."

That night, Turner was booked into the Ritz, an art-deco club in the East Village that, reflecting Turner's own transformation, couldn't have been further removed from Vegas Strip ballrooms. When Turner first played the club, in 1981, Mick Jagger, Robert De Niro, Diana Ross, and Susan Sarandon were all in attendance. Now, thanks to "Ball of Confusion," Turner's return engagement in the first month of 1983 had another stellar guest list in the house — Bowie, Keith Richards, and tennis bad boy John McEnroe.

Dressed for part of the show in a black-leather minidress, Turner was up for the challenge: Her intro to "Proud Mary" was even more suggestive than usual, her renditions of the Bowie and Henley songs burned down the house, and a slow, simmering version of the Beatles' "Help!" added a touch of real-life gravitas. At one point, Behringer turned toward the balcony that wrapped around most of the venue to see Turner's all-star fans cheering her on. "You look up and there's David Bowie and all these people, and it was like, 'Whoa,'" she says. "They were all rooting for her 100 percent. They all idolized her."

After the show, everyone gathered in the small VIP room off the office of club owner Jerry Brandt, which held 10 people tops. Turner, who always insisted she didn't drink or do drugs, playfully grabbed a champagne bottle and, in one of many flirty moments between them, pretended to pour it into Bowie's mouth. According to photographer Bob Gruen, who was in the room, Bowie played along, although he was worried the champagne would spill on his clothes. The festivities carried on at Keith Richards' room at the Plaza hotel, where Richards played piano, and food and alcohol were wheeled in until dawn. "Everyone was happy for Tina that night," says Gruen. "She showed she could do it by herself; it didn't have to be 'Ike and Tina.'" As Turner later wrote, "For me, that night at the Ritz was the equivalent of going to the ball (minus the part about Prince Charming) because it changed my life dramatically."

With that, work on what would become *Private Dancer* began, starting with Turner returning to London for another collaboration with Ware and Marsh. And again, Turner was less than enthralled with the songs they suggested, which included "Let's Stay Together." "Aren't you guys into any rock & roll?" she asked. Again, Turner relented: As she admitted, "I had a crush on someone back in America," so the song appealed to her. As with "Ball of Confusion," her simmering take on the Al Green classic was initially not available in the states. Only after it had become a hit in the U.K. did Capitol deign to release it at home.

Still, nothing was guaranteed. Drummer Bruno thought Turner's future so uncertain that he left the band. "I'd been doing it for three years, and it never changed," he says. "We were playing the hotels, and I was like, 'I'm done. I don't know if this is going anywhere.' Just goes to show you how much I knew." One of his last gigs with her was a McDonald's convention in Hawaii. (Bruno later rejoined the band after *Private Dancer* and continued as her drummer for decades.)

PHOTO BY BRIAN RASIC/GETTY IMAGES

REJUVENATION Photographer Bob Gruen says the Ritz set "showed everyone she could do it by herself and it didn't have to be 'Ike and Tina.'"

But the success of "Let's Stay Together" finally sent *Private Dancer* into overdrive, and Davies and Carter scrambled to find producers and songs. One of them, "What's Love Got to Do With It," had already been rejected by other big names. Turner herself nearly passed. "I didn't like it," Turner said. "I didn't think it was my style," also dubbing it "wimpy." But Davies persevered, and the single, which brought out the weariness and tenderness in Turner's voice, would be the one that firmly announced to the world that Turner was reborn. It had taken only four years of expectations, crushed hopes, wrong turns, and slurs, but Turner finally arrived, and for good.

"The whole thing is about earning your way," she later wrote in *I, Tina*, pondering advice to a child, "and you don't really get there until you earn it."

WHAT TINA TURNER MEANT TO ME

BY VICE PRESIDENT KAMALA HARRIS

When I was a child, my mother would play "Proud Mary" on repeat as I danced around our living room, singing along into my toy microphone at the top of my lungs. The power in her voice and in that song made me a lifelong fan of Tina Turner.

Tina Turner spoke a universal language. Through her music, she told stories of love and loss, of triumph and pain, and she told them in ways that people around the globe could understand and relate to. Her songs — and the strength with which she sang them — have moved millions.

So many of those songs were rooted in freedom, individuality, and self-determination — at a time when such concepts felt off-limits to Black female artists. But Tina Turner did more than just give voice to those values — she lived them. Onstage and off, she was unapologetically Tina. With her very presence representing an affront to the status quo, she stood tall and proud, demonstrating to the world that rock stars could look like her, too, and reminding us all the power of living as our true, authentic selves.

The true, authentic Tina Turner was a global icon who left an indelible mark on American music and culture. Among countless awards and honors, the "Queen of Rock & Roll" was inducted into the Rock & Roll Hall of Fame not just once, but twice. With Grammy wins in the pop, rock, and R&B categories, Tina Turner made an impact on a range of genres wider than many artists before her ever had. She helped evolve the music of our nation.

Tina Turner sacrificed a great deal to have the success that she did. Throughout her life, she endured racism, sexism, and domestic violence — experiences that nobody should ever have to face. But she met those challenges head-on with courage and conviction. As she later put it, experiences that "could have shattered me, instead became fuel for my journey, propelling me upward." Those experiences became fuel for the journeys of so many others — listeners whom she inspired with her songs of struggle and overcoming. And today, her life remains a testament to all those who believe in what can be, unburdened by what has been.

Growing up, my mother often told me, "Kamala, you may be the first to do many things. Make sure you are not the last." Throughout her life, Tina Turner was in fact the first to do many things. She was the first woman and the first Black person to appear on the cover of Rolling Stone, among other "firsts." But through her lifelong work of mentoring and developing younger artists, she widened the path and made sure that she would not be the last.

Through her music and her style, Tina Turner changed the ways in which we express ourselves and enjoy ourselves. The joy she shared with us will live on in her music for as long as we continue to sing and dance along to it. RS

MICHAEL OCHS ARCHIVES/GETTY IMAGES

UNDEFEATED Life's challenges, Tina said, were "fuel for my journey, propelling me upward."

SHE STOOD TALL AND PROUD, DEMONSTRATING TO THE WORLD THAT ROCK STARS COULD LOOK LIKE HER, TOO.

SHE WAS MY SISTER

BY ROBBIE MONTGOMERY

Former Ikette

When I first met Tina, we had an instant connection. Back in those days, her name was "Little Ann." I was sort of the crazy, funny one, and she was looking for a laugh. She had a real healthy, bust-out laugh. She never thought she was a great singer. She was a rough singer. [But] she was a great performer. Nobody could do it like her. She was an entertainer from her heart. We were all 21, just trying to make it.

Ike was very serious. The Ikettes and Tina would rehearse all the way in the car, rehearse in hotels. We would rehearse any place that he called a rehearsal. We didn't realize we were making history because it wasn't glamorous. We went to our gigs, traveled by bus, went to the hotel, rehearsed, and the next morning did the same thing over again. It was just trying to keep surviving, focusing on becoming the best.

I'll never forget this reader [fortune teller] told Tina back in the Sixties that she would live in Europe and she would marry somebody there. She held on to that. She was looking for hope. We were all concerned about [Ike's abuse]. Tina was like a sister to me. We would try to get her to leave. We talked about it all the time, every time *it* happened. Even though it didn't happen in front of us, we knew what happened. Back in the day, you didn't know what a person was going through behind doors. Eventually, she came out and told her story. It was inspiring to a lot of women — even though your past might be muddied up, you can overcome it. I was happy for her, proud with my chest sticking out. It always inspired me: If she's still doing it, maybe one day I'll be able to do it. I will always love her. The bond that we have will always be in my heart.

HAIL TO THE QUEEN

BY ROB SHEFFIELD

We'll never live in a world without Tina Turner. She didn't just pull off the greatest comeback in music history — she invented the whole concept of the comeback as we know it today. She became a solo superstar when she was 44. Things like that simply don't happen. That's how old Brandy, Usher, Adam Levine, and John Legend are right now. Tina Turner was just beginning. But nothing she faced could ever scare that grit out of her voice.

She carried the whole story of American music in her voice, because in many ways, she was that story, and also a lot more. She was Anna Mae Bullock from Nutbush, Tennessee, daughter of sharecroppers, fighting her way in and out of the Chitlin' Circuit. She was just a kid when she got famous, as half of Ike and Tina Turner. Her deep-country voice and his guitar always made a fearsome combo in early hits like "It's Gonna Work Out Fine" and "I Idolize You." "The emotions I expressed were real because I lived those feelings," she wrote in a 2019 essay in Rolling Stone. "Even 'Private Dancer' — which seems to be about prostitution, but is also about wishes, hopes, and dreams — tells the story of women like me, caught up in sad situations, who somehow find a way to go on."

Her defining hit was "What's Love Got to Do With It," which shocked radio audiences in 1984 between Madonna, Prince, and Cyndi Lauper. Unlike anyone else near her age, she had zero interest in passing for young. This woman had lived. She'd stared down more hard times than your miserable Smiths-loving teenage mind could imagine. She truly became Tina Turner in 1984, with *Private Dancer*. It was a new kind of rock blockbuster, shimmying over generational, racial, cultural, and musical boundaries. Lots of stars had claimed to be the Queen of Rock & Roll, but after *Private Dancer*, nobody came near that crown.

Tina's life story turns on her escape from and triumph over her abusive marriage. Strange as it might seem today, she was one of the first stars to talk aloud about domestic violence. It's easy to take for granted, partly because of the way she changed public awareness about spousal abuse. Hero worship for Tina Turner is practically an industry, yet we're still underrating what she did. But part of her greatness is refusing to be the professional survivor the media wanted her to be. She didn't need another hero.

When her life story became the Angela Bassett movie *What's Love Got to Do With It*, she couldn't bring herself to watch it. As she wrote in Rolling Stone, "I never saw *What's Love Got to Do With It* because I was too close to those painful memories." She resisted the idea of the Broadway musical *Tina* for the same reason, saying, "I didn't feel like talking about that stuff from the past because it gave me bad dreams." But she loved the musical when she saw it. She said, "I want to pass the baton, so to speak, to them, and anyone facing a challenge, so they leave the theater standing proud, with their chests out and chins up, inspired to believe 'I can do it.'"

'TINA WAS SO PUNK'

BY BRITTANY HOWARD

Tina Turner, to me, is a living, breathing phoenix, a symbol of resurrection. A career like that, a successful career, where it all goes away and comes back bigger and stronger and brighter? That doesn't happen very often. That's what I love about Tina most. The music's amazing. The performing is amazing, but this story arc of her incredible life — from food stamps to icon status, she never gave up.

The first time I saw Tina on television, my mom was like, "This is really important. You need to see this." And it was legs, and hair, and running all over the place. It was ferocious. I'd never seen anything like it. For my mother, she symbolized power and strength. Because life for my mother wasn't easy. A lot of pain, a lot of heartbreak, a lot of suffering. And Tina stood out to all of the women who were going through that.

I want to actually see more older, wiser people getting their chance to tell their story in popular media. Seeing Tina in my life from such a young age — a woman acting like that, singing like that, sweating, and having muscles, having no care in the world, and having this freedom — I know what that did for me as a young girl, and then as I was growing into a woman.

She was obviously the best part of Ike and Tina. That song "Funkier Than a Mosquito's Tweeter" is my jam because she's talking all this smack about Ike. He could have wrote any of them songs for anybody else and it would've been nothing to really marvel at. But because you got Tina in the mix, that's what turns those songs on.

A Black woman singing rock & roll was hugely inspiring to me as someone who also wants to express myself in a loud, bold way. As a performer, I was inspired by Tina taking up all of that space as a Black woman: taking risks, paying no mind, finding her freedom. She didn't need any validation. She was powerful. It was subversive as hell. It was so punk. She was more rock & roll than rock & roll even knew what to do with. Here's this Black woman, muscular and strong, just absolutely wiping the floor with everyone else. That's badass, and courageous.

PAUL BERGEN/REDFERNS/GETTY IMAGES

LAST DANCE
"I want to pass the baton to anyone facing a challenge," Turner said. "So they are inspired to believe 'I can do it.'"

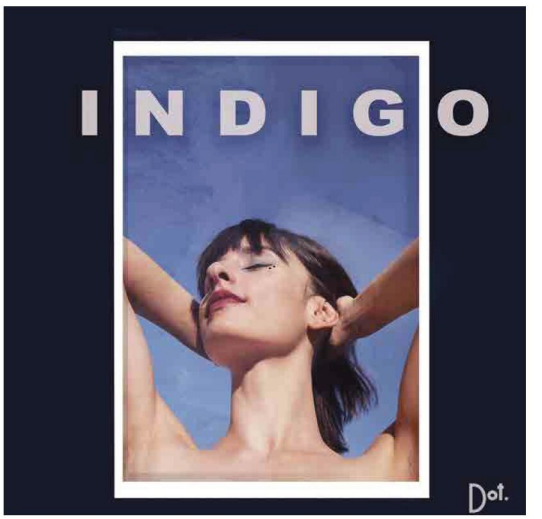
From Raftaar and Prabh Deep's surprise collaboration to the return of Donn Bhat and evocative sonic snapshots of time by Kamakshi Khanna, Aditi Ramesh and more, here are songs that kept us hooked, in no order or rank

The Best Indian Songs of 2023 So Far

By Anurag Tagat and David Britto

Long Distances – *"Lovesong for an Apocalpyse"*

MUMBAI INDIE-ROCK outfit Long Distances – comprising vocalist Aarifah Rebello, guitarist-producer Apurv Agrawal and guitarist-producer Zubin Pastakia – released their sophomore single in the shape of the journeying "Lovesong for an Apocalypse." It has catchy vocals, a groovy bass line, hooky guitar parts and more, and is off the band's upcoming debut EP *How the Mighty Will Fall*. The group also tapped seasoned Mumbai drummer Jai Row Kavi to sit behind the kit for the track, and even worked with bassist-producer Krishna Jhaveri as well as producer Sandunes who provided additional synths to the song. — **DAVID BRITTO**

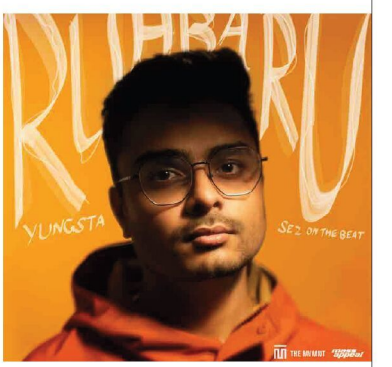


Dot. – *"Indigo"*

NEW DELHI-BRED and Bengaluru-based singer-songwriter Aditi Saigal aka Dot. released a fresh single earlier this year, the easy-going pop-folk song "Indigo." The fabulously written track includes slick production, quirky lyrics, Dot.'s breezy and smooth vocal delivery and more. **– D.B.**

Yungsta x Sez On The Beat – *"Ruhbaru"*

NEW DELHI HIP-HOP artist Yungsta tells his story in a whole new way on "Ruhbaru," the lead single and opening song off his album *MEEN*, produced by Sez on the Beat. The confessional tone is sharp and delivered with a conviction that says he wouldn't change a thing about his journey so far and it's capped off by a starry guitar solo. **– ANURAG TAGAT**



Tejas – *"Some Kind of Nothing"*

WITH "SOME KIND Of Nothing," Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Tejas delves deeper into the pop realm with bubblegum soundscapes, upbeat and catchy melodies, slick production, honeyed vocals, harmonies and more. The track also features Tejas' longtime bandmates, drummer Jehangir Jehangir and bassist Adil Kurwa. - D.B.

Hanumankind ft. Parimal Shais – *"Go To Sleep"*

RAPPER HANUMANKIND and producer Parimal Shais joined forces on the explosive "Go To Sleep." The track includes a dancey yet in-your-face beat influenced by South Indian soundscapes while Hanumankind delivers hard-hitting rhymes about wrestler Jeff Hardy, *Fight Club* and more. - D.B.

Raftaar x Prabh Deep – *"TRAP PRAA"*

ONE OF THE BEST surprises in Indian hip-hop came with the announcement and drop of Raftaar and Prabh Deep's collaborative EP *PRAA*. Across four tracks, one of the most shape-shifting Punjabi artists of our times and a rap frontrunner like Raftaar ran riot without a care for boundaries. The song "TRAP PRAA," however, encapsulates just the kind of sparks that fly on a powerful collaboration like this. - A.T.

Irfana – *"Sheila Silk"*

KODAIKANAL-BRED RAPPER Irfana's first release via Def Jam India is the hypnotic "Sheila Silk." The track includes a gritty beat while Irfana's flow and rhymes stand out. The song is also a tribute to South Indian film icon Silk Smitha and appropriately brings out dominating bars from Irfana. - D.B.

The Lightyears Explode – *"Pills"*

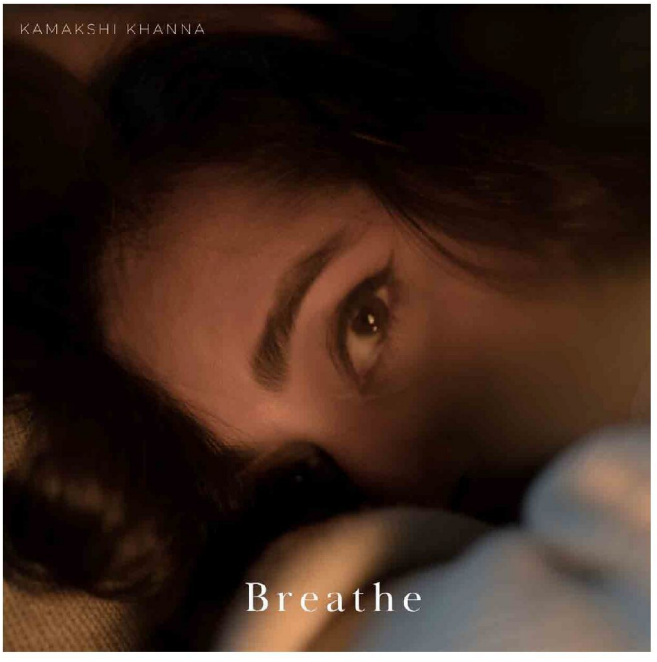
MUMBAI POP/PUNK BAND The Lightyears Explode began teasing their sophomore full-length album *Suburban Prose* earlier this year with the record's lead single, the jittery and explosive "Pills." The Lightyears Explode interject the song with distorted guitars, steely vocals, blitzing basslines and a high-octane chorus with jumpy drums that are a nod to their punk roots. - D.B.

Bhayanak Maut – *"Just a Metal Kid"*

MUMBAI METALLERS Bhayanak Maut reference some of India's best-known metal outfits such as Demonic Resurrection, Scribe, Undying Inc, Inner Sanctum, Skyharbor and Providence on their scorching track "Just a Metal Kid." The song includes blistering guitars, pulsating drums, growls as well as rock band Indus Creed's frontman Uday Benegal singing a hooky vocal refrain. - D.B.

Donn Bhat, Sakur Khan Sufi – *"Swali Hu"*

NEARLY SEVEN YEARS after the release of the future-classic record *Connected*, Donn Bhat comes back just as evocative with the mystical and philosophizing vocals of Sakur Khan Sufi on "Swali Hu." Bhat always knows his way around making an entrancing beat, but this time, he also brings in Rajasthani folk elements alongside wiry guitar melodies that are seemingly informed by African desert blues. - A.T.

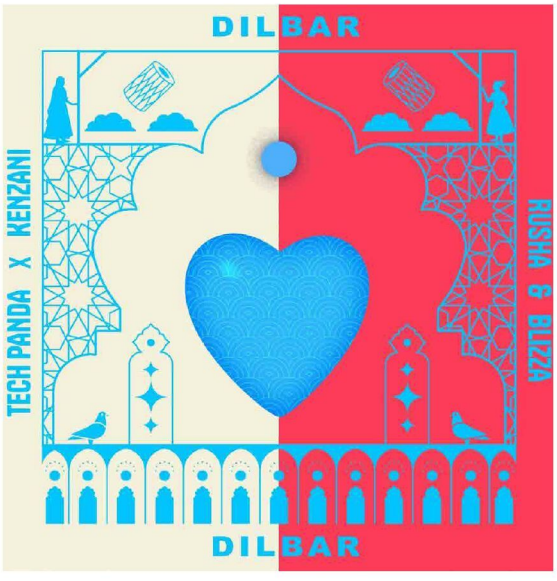


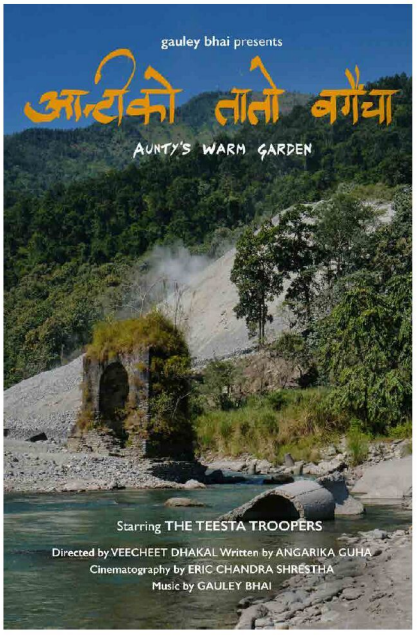
Kamakshi Khanna – *"Breathe"*

NEW DELHI-BRED and Mumbai-based singer-songwriter Kamakshi Khanna kicked off the year with a resounding new single, the ukulele-aided "Breathe." Apart from Khanna's emotive vocals, the song also includes a string arrangement, heart-thumping drums and a crisp bass groove. - D.B.

Aditi Ramesh – *"Filter Coffee"*

BENGALURU-BASED SINGER-SONGWRITER Aditi Ramesh's first release in two years came neatly wrapped in soul, R&B and pop with the caffeinated "Filter Coffee." The song includes the artist's witty lyricism, her mellifluous vocals as well as slick synths that drive the track. - D.B.





Gauley Bhai – *"Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha"*

THE EXPLOITATION OF NATURAL resources in the name of development can have far-reaching effects and Bengaluru-based, Kalimpong/Kozhikode-bred band Gauley Bhai shine a spotlight on the psychological toll that ecological problems can bring on "Aunty Ko Tato Bagaicha." It's metaphorized storytelling set to frantic, jazz-informed rhythms and unshakeable grooves that the band has championed since their 2019 album *Joro*. - A.T.

Dhanji, Neil Ck, Circle Tone – *"Thaltej Blues"*

THERE'S SOMETHING wholly challenging about listening to "Thaltej Blues," in a good way. Where other hip-hop artists in the country are staying within their lane, Ahmedabad's Dhanji is all about pushing in all directions. "2023 much more bayiyayiyounce," he declares on the song that's playful, raucous and centered around ideas of home and personal growth. - A.T.

Tech Panda x Kenzani, Rusha & Blizza – *"Dilbar"*

BOTH PRODUCER DUOS Tech Panda x Kenzani and Rusha & Blizza have spent years chipping away at perfecting the present-day "Indian electronic" sound so it was no surprise that when they teamed up for "Dilbar," it was going to be a banger. The track takes a vocal hook, samples it and drops it into several different treatments in less than three minutes, making for a journeying dancefloor hit. - A.T.

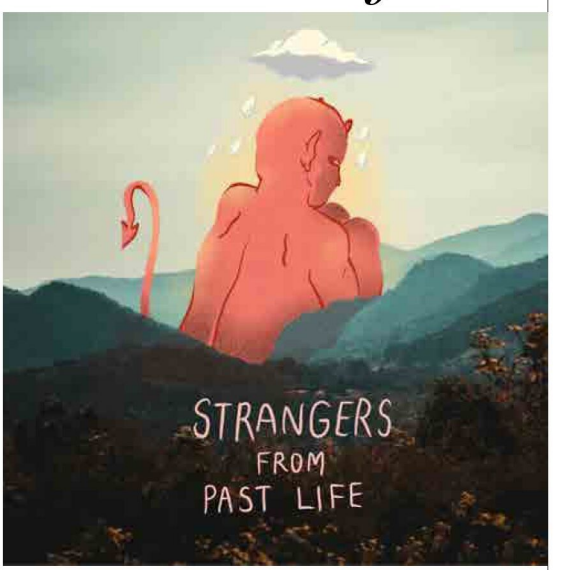
From guttural extreme metal by Demonstealer to a refreshing take on synth-pop by Dreamhour and Indian Ocean's powerful album, here are the most cohesive statements in music

The Best Indian Albums of 2023 So Far

By Anurag Tagat and David Britto

10

Jamna Paar – *Strangers From Past Life*



NEW DELHI BASSIST Gaurav Balani (from rockers Parikrama and electro-rockers Inalab) and flautist Shashank Singhania's electronica duo Jamna Paar released their debut eight-track full-length album *Strangers from Past Life* earlier this year. The pair pack in plenty of soundscapes throughout the record from drum and bass to Indian classical and more. The album also includes a host of collaborators such as Apeksha Dandekar, Aditi Singh Sharma, Saptak Chatterjee and others to help bring the songs to life. — DAVID BRITTO

9 Ramil Ganjoo – *Khaak*

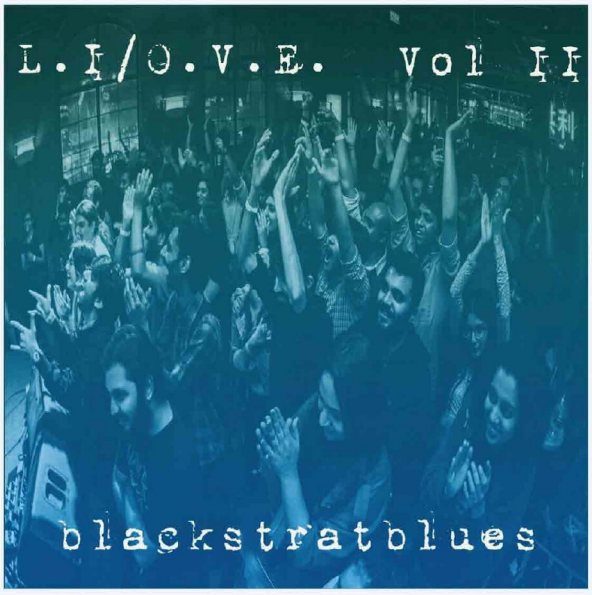
SINGER-SONGWRITER AND PRODUCER Ramil Ganjoo has a penchant for dream-pop and indie-folk that come together in a way that's both familiar and fresh on his debut album *Khaak*. Sure, he's created a couple of versions each of songs like "Khala" and "Waqt" to push the album into a solid nine-track collection, but there's ingenuity in his craft. At the center of it – especially at the start with the opening title track – is a story of self-belief and self-acceptance, offered with warm guitar melodies, a few surprisingly dexterous solos and lush production. From juxtaposed offerings like "Sheher" and "Ghar" to the whimsical duet "Khala" with Vidhya, there's something for everyone into singer-songwriter music. - ANURAG TAGAT

8 Anurag Naidu, Alba Santos, Aniel Someillan, Isais Alves – *Odyssey*

MUMBAI PIANIST Anurag Naidu joined forced with Spanish singer Alba Santos, Cuban bassist Aniel Someillan and Brazilian drummer Isais Alves on the genre-bending eight-track album *Odyssey*. *Odyssey* overall is a beautiful concoction of Brazilian rhythms, jazz, R&B, neo-soul, Cubano, flamenco and funk music. The musicians on show deliver exceptional performances across the eight songs. Santos' nifty and dynamic vocals add plenty of color to the tracks while Alves and Someillan are sublime with their solid grooves that lay the foundation for the songs, and Naidu is at his creative best with his deft touch on the piano, offering melodious moments and lots of dexterity. - D.B.

7 Demonstealer – *The Propaganda Machine*

MORE THAN 20 YEARS after starting out in his bedroom in Mumbai as a kid obsessed with extreme metal, Demonstealer aka Sahil Makhija has shown he's not going to stop (despite the times his bands like Demonic Resurrection and Reptilian Death have been seemingly forced into slow-mode or dissolution, respectively). On his latest solo (but feature-heavy) album *The Propaganda Machine*, Demonstealer digs right into cut-throat black/death metal with plenty of melodic elements and big choruses. More importantly, he's doing what every metal band has the chance to do but often doesn't – call out manipulative politics, the oft-paraded "anti-national" narrative and more. - A.T.



6 Blackstratblues – *L.I/O.V.E. Vol. II*

JUST LIKE EXACTLY A YEAR AGO, Mumbai/Auckland guitarist Warren Mendonsa released a live album for his blue-rock outfit Blackstratblues entitled *L.I/O.V.E. Vol. II*. The new live album includes songs from Blackstratblues that were performed in 2017 and features the core band; drummer Jai Row Kavi, bassist Adi Mistry, keyboardist Beven Fonseca and of course, Mendonsa. Although songs overlap from 2022's *L.I/O.V.E. Vol. I*, the latest 15-track offering has its own charm as the band power through tracks such as the splendid "Anuva's Sky," the lofty "North Star," and the pulsating "Renaissance Mission" among others. – D.B.

4 Dirge – *Dirge*

MUMBAI DOOM/SLUDGE and post-metal band Dirge capture all the turmoil of inner and outer worlds with their self-titled album that came out in March. Across four tracks that trudge on with just a sliver of hope in mind, catharsis does come at the end of things. Songs like "Hollow" and "Grief" build on the band's strengths and "Condemned" has far more experimentation than we've heard from Dirge before, going through quiet and loud with soul-piercing intent. It's about five years between their debut album *Ah Puch* but the fact that this is a self-titled album tells you all you need to know about a metal band in their creative prime. - A.T.

5 The Bodhisattwa Trio – *Frontier*

KOLKATA/NEW DELHI JAZZ OUTFIT The Bodhisattwa Trio teamed up with Croatia's Mimika Orchestra on the journeying 11-track album *Frontier*. The instrumental concept album is served up deliciously with jazz-fusion soundscapes and includes intricate drum and bass grooves, melodic guitar arrangements as well as flowing horn parts. Some of the standout songs on the record include the surreal opener "Nuclear Apocalypse," the hypnotic "Ghosts of Mars," the raucous "Countergenesis" and the album penultimate track, the moody "Final Frontier." - D.B.

3 Dreamhour – *Now That We Are Here*

DEBO SANYAL AKA DREAMHOUR, the Siliguri-based producer-singer keeps finding new ways to make synthwave exciting and there are perhaps only a few who can stick to a niche the way he has. With his latest album *Now That We Are Here*, there's more elements of soul and pop mixed in with retro synths and more. With a few assists from vocalist Dokodoko, there's indefatigable synth-pop cuts like "It's A Song," "She's Everything" and "Own Tonight." Dreamhour sticks to more indulgent retro-wave as well, on songs like "Pulp Motel" and the Bollywood synth-era informed "Rajdoot." – A.T.

2 Tsumyoki – *A Message From The Moon*

WITH THE RELEASE OF his 2022 single "Pink Blue," Goa-based Tsumyoki was on to something and he's clearly been chasing it for a few years. The culmination of that is *A Message from the Moon*, an openhearted treatise, if you will, about heartbreak and getting past it. Written and produced for the most part as he grew out of the last of his teen years, the emotional growth is heard in leaps and bounds on songs like "Falling Down," the breezy, escapist pop tune "Perfect Life" and "Feel Okay." There are still darker, rock-leaning cuts like "Fonkey Monkey" with fellow Goan rapper Kidd Mange and "Figure Out" and "Hard Enough." - A.T.

1 Indian Ocean – *Tu Hai*

ON THEIR FIRST ALBUM since 2014's *Tandanu*, New Delhi fusion stalwarts Indian Ocean still carry their protest music torch high, albeit in their own way. *Tu Hai* is focused more on humanity's ecological footprint and all the other things that manipulates them. Through a rousing chorus of voices, they bat for hope on "Jaadu Maaya," take on an enriching saxophone-aided excursion with "Jungle" and invite veteran percussionist Vikku Vinayakram on the playful "Iss Tan Dhan." Cavernous fusion-psychedelic experiments abound as well, on the two-part title track and "Rebirth," proving that Indian Ocean are still doing it their way in the midst of changing times. - A.T.